

Salon offers balding men a cool zap

\$3,000 for laser treatment in Yorkville draws clientele – just no names, please

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Twice a week, Greg swings by a Yorkville salon for a 30-minute appointment to sit under something that looks like a model spaceship. It has nothing to do with aliens – instead, it's an attempt to save himself from baldness.

Dressed in Prada and YSL sportswear, the 34-year-old entertainment industry professional works on his BlackBerry or watches TV while he gets his treatment at the Tony Chaar Salon.

His only company in the salon's private room is the "spaceship," a low-level laser therapy (LLLT) unit that aims to restore and strengthen his thinning hair. It silently beams red light while hovering overhead.

Greg (not his real name) has undergone the laser therapy for two months and wants to continue with the treatment during the summer. "I think it's working," he says.

One would hope so, at \$3,000 for a three-month course of treatment.

Salon owner Tony Chaar says demand is rising.

"I've had this for five months and haven't advertised it," says Chaar. "The treatment has spread through word of mouth. I have clients ranging from their early 30s to 60 years old. They are all men but there are two ladies in their 50s with thinning hair who are also interested in trying it."

But does LLLT (a "cold laser" that doesn't project heat) actually work? Dr. Martin Unger, a Toronto plastic surgeon and hair transplant specialist, says it does.

"(LLLT) increases the energy in the cells.... It is like the fuel, the gasoline of cells," explains Unger, considered an international authority in the field of hair loss. "It increases collagen synthesis and protein synthesis. It decreases inflammation in the area and increases the circulation by making blood vessels in the area larger and also creating new blood vessels."

Unger, who acts as a consultant to the treatment given at Tony Chaar Salon, cites a clinical study he supervised that found that the laser therapy resulted in 86 per cent of patients regrowing hair, while another 11 per cent stopped losing hair. The study was done by Dr. Roy Geronemus.

In December 2003, a LLLT hand-held device was recognized as a medical device by Health Canada; the U.S. Food and Drug Administration followed suit in January, 2007.

While LLLT for hair restoration is more common in Japan, Eastern Europe and

Scandinavia, it is still a novelty treatment in North America.

Similar LLLT systems are found at some Toronto hair loss treatment centres and doctors' offices but Tony Chaar's is the only Toronto hair salon offering the Sunetics Clinical Laser Model E system. Chaar, who has been losing hair on his crown and hairline, says he has used the laser unit on himself.

"I've been using it for two months and I can see a difference in my hair," he says.

For Chaar's client Greg, having a balding father and brother and seeing his own gradual hair loss begin at 30 prompted him to try the laser treatment.

"Rogaine and taking pills didn't interest me," Greg says. "When Tony mentioned (the laser therapy), I said, 'Why not try something and see what happens? As long as it doesn't make all of my hair fall out.'"

Unger admits the medical field is still not sure what combination or which particular factors in LLLT actually stop hair loss and regrow hair, making it a somewhat controversial treatment. But he maintains the therapy is 100 per cent safe, with no side effects. Of drugs used to treat hair loss, Rogaine can irritate the skin and Propecia can cause sexual dysfunction, he says.

"Also, Rogaine and Propecia work in the crown area and barely in the frontal areas, whereas low level lasers work in the front and the back," says Unger.

Though Unger would recommend laser therapy to both men and women losing hair, he thinks the best candidates for the treatment are young men who are in the first stages of hair loss, since the laser therapy works only on live hair follicles and does not reactivate dead ones. Unfortunately, most twentysomethings can't afford the costly treatment.

"Hair loss can be devastating, especially to young people," says Unger. "I was on a U.S. talk show and a fellow who started a bald-is-beautiful club said he was suicidal."

Some bald men are rejecting hair loss fixes altogether.

Tony Snesko, founder of Bald R Us, a U.S.-based association and website (baldrus.com) embracing baldness, says he receives letters from young men saying they have contemplated suicide after losing their hair.

With message boards detailing horror stories of hair transplants and hairpieces, Bald R Us takes a firm stand against hair loss treatments and Snesko doesn't believe in the LLLT hype, though he hasn't tried it himself.

"I've never had any of my members respond that it works," he says, "Hair loss treatment is a multi-billion dollar industry. (Men) are willing to try anything and it just adds to their anxiety and destroys their self-esteem, which is why I created the website, to persuade men to avoid rugs, drugs, plugs, massage and laser."

If young men are experiencing hair loss in their teens, Snesko suggests a close-cropped buzz cut. "When you reach college, just shave it off," he says, "Suddenly, you'll be free of anxiety, of worry, of hair."