

A TOOTH LASER PATIENT SPEAKS OUT

Dear Dr. McCrummen: I am not impressed at all with "Laser Dentistry"! I went to a "laser dentist" in California and the experience was really bad. They advertised "no sound, no shots, no pain, no drill". Ha!! They put on one of those rubber shields and that hurt, then they put a couple of clamps on my teeth and that really hurt my gums. They blew air and cold water on my teeth. Then I had to listen to a mini-jack-hammer and get water sprayed all over me. All they did was protect a couple of teeth with plastic sealants for that.

When they found a cavity they put another clamp on my tooth and stuck a ring and wedge between my teeth and then they sprayed more air and water on my tooth. After all of that they said I needed a shot and switched to using a drill. So much for painless, quiet, no-shot, no drill dental work. The bill seemed very painful, too, and they said it was because they were using high quality lasers. Insurance didn't pay more for laser use, I had to. All this left a bad taste in my mouth, literally. I don't think lasers are all that they are cracked up to be and will stick with the regular way. Drills are not really so loud, and I want to be numb and not have to think about it what is going on. The laser was not quiet at all!! What do you think? Why do they have to put piece of rubber over my mouth and floss it forcefully between my teeth, put a ring around my tooth, and stick a wedge between my teeth? C.S.

I have heard this scenario many times so you are not alone. "Laser" is a catchy high-tech generic term that leads us to believe it is a modern magical medical treatment modality for everything. There are several different types of medical lasers. Some are great for diagnosis of cavities hidden from sight and x-rays. Some lasers are for surgical cutting of soft tissue, such as skin, gums, and organs like the gall bladder, polyps, etc. instead of using a scalpel or electro-surgery. And, there are lasers for hard tissues, for surgery on teeth and bone.

Surgical lasers work by super-heating water molecules in the skin with a focused light. It is much like focusing the sun on a piece of paper with a magnifying glass and igniting it. Lasers are mainly used for soft tissue surgery. The laser units are much more expensive than other devices; therefore, the procedures typically cost more. On teeth, a laser has to cut through the driest and hardest substance in the body; tooth enamel. It works by heating the minute water molecules and explodes them, chipping enamel away. Some are assisted by intense water spray bursts that they call "energized water". The developers are working in the right direction but have more work to do. It is new to dentistry, is more costly for dentists and usually more for patients, and is not covered by dental insurance. Laser should be considered "drill less" dentistry, because the drill is often still needed, as is numbing.

A Rubber Dam is often used to protect the surrounding skin and teeth, isolate the tooth being worked on, and requires flossing and clamping to keep it from coming off. A ring is placed around a tooth to hold the filling material in place, like a form holds the concrete in place until it sets. A wedge is needed to help keep the teeth in contact when the ring is removed. Being numb for all of this means you do not have to think about everything that is being done to fix your teeth. Modern drills are very quiet, you can wear headphones and sleep, and shots can be almost un-noticed in many cases. Lasers are just another choice in dental care options but it does not look like it will replace the efficient mini-dental drill or numbing. Time and experimentation is needed. For information on comfortable dental visits read the dental column in the August 25th edition.