

The Thermage Experiment

By Angela Braden

Immediately after the thirty-minute session, which would have been one hour had I been doing both sides of my face like any normal citizen, Michael Lynch, Lead Medical Esthetician at Blue Medspa, sat me up and handed me a mirror. I had to admit, compared to the untreated side of my face, the “Thermaged” side did look different—lifted, and definitely fuller. Knowing that most faces are asymmetrical, I could account for the seemingly “lifted” result, but the fuller, taunt feel? That was undeniable evidence that *something* had happened under the skin in that short session. I’d have to see how the lifting/tightening element played out over the next six months, but the skin was undeniably firmer immediately . . . maybe just swelling under the skin, my inner skeptic suggested.

With this skin-tightening treatment, skepticism comes naturally, mainly because it seems too good to be true. In the completely non-invasive category (no scalpel, no surgery, no injections), Thermage® is one of the most exciting cosmetic technological advancements of our time. The promise is exhilarating: skin tightening and toning—all happening beneath the surface of the skin—with absolutely no downtime. No redness, no bruising, no peeling. According to its manufacturer, Thermage is a “safe, clinically proven way to tighten and contour skin, with improvements in tone, contour, and texture occurring naturally through the stimulation of the recipient’s own collagen.”

Along with its miraculous capabilities, Thermage has had its share of criticism, and inconsistent results, since its FDA approval in July, 2000. It has been one of the most debated cosmetic treatments, with a bit too much variation in efficacy for some. Why this great dissonance surrounding such dream technology? Sara Goza, who heads up the clinical team at Blue Medspa, under Medical Director, Dr. Paul Cox, explains, “Technology is ever changing. Thermage went back to the drawing board when patients and clinicians began to complain,” she says. The subsequent reworking of this promising technology resulted in what Goza refers to as “new generation Thermage”.

Now, using a larger tip, to reduce pain and increase effectiveness, as well as revamping the training and techniques for practitioners (such as increasing the number of passes over the face) Thermage is now delivering on its technological potential more effectively with less pain. My result is a good indication that “New Generation” is on solid ground and recipients can look forward to more consistent results.

As the underlying skin responds over a six to eight month period following treatment, results continue to reveal themselves. This is why I had to do one half of my face—who remembers the details of her face from six months ago? I suspect this contributes in part to the controversy. It’s hard to miss the results when you’re looking at the before and the after all on one face staring back at you in the mirror: left side: “before”; right side: “after”. That exactly what I did for six months.

In my case, the right side (treated side) began to subtly re-contour. The cheekbone became more pronounced, higher, and slightly rounder, the eyebrow lifted slightly, and the lines (crows feet) were definitely less defined. The hollowness under my eye was completely absent. These are all very good things, since they epitomize what the entire beauty world has become obsessed with and what *New York Magazine* has termed the “New New Face”. This is the same modern aesthetic ideal that has made dermal fillers, like Juvaderm® and Cosmoblast® all the rage. It asserts a beauty standard of youthful volume, concentrated not on pulling up and back, like the facelift does, but pushing the face outward. Think baby face—round, firm, thick-skinned. That’s what modern beauty strives for—more volume—fuller, plumper, contoured. And that’s just what Thermage provides. At the five-month mark, shown below, I was a believer (and anxious to get the other side done).

This is really a story about collagen—that magical underlying tissue that holds everything together and provides volume. The thicker it is, the younger you look. It's not a dramatic change on the surface, but for the "new new face", that's exactly the goal. For natural plumping from underlying collagen stimulation, Thermage delivers.



Why did it work for me?

There are several factors that influence results with Thermage. Below are some that could have contributed to mine.

- **Age** - younger skin, with more collagen to work with may respond better. (I'm 35.)
- **Skill of technician** - Thermage is very technique dependent. The person performing the treatment should be trained in the latest protocols, like completing the correct cycle time, providing multiple passes, and focusing on areas known to achieve best results. (My technician, Michael at Blue Medpa has had recent and extensive training.)
- **Feedback from Client** – Because Thermage uses radio frequency energy, giving pain feedback is vital to letting the technician know your individual "impedance" (resistance to the energy) level. This impedance level corresponds to the energy needed to cause the collagen to contract adequately. (So, my saying "uncle" helped Michael ensure the right level of energy was delivered to the skin . . .not to mention made the experience much more pleasant for me.)
- **Nutrients** - Recent nutritional concerns have emerged surrounding many cosmetic treatments because, it is theorized, all that regeneration can tax the nutrients the body has in stock. So, I *stocked up* before and after Thermage with nutrients that support, what else? Collagen production! Namely, Aloe juice, 1000 mg of vitamin C, and extra 500 mg of calcium.