

Laser technique helps smokers kick habit

Local nicotine addicts head to Germantown clinic for treatment

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Gordon Servis has been a smoker for 38 years, but now thinks he's kicked the habit thanks to an interesting treatment: he was zapped with a laser.

No, this isn't a scene from the new James Bond movie - it's a therapeutic treatment akin to acupuncture which former smokers are raving about.

Low-level laser light is applied to certain pressure points in the body to stimulate beneficial responses and relieve stress.

"The energy that's inherent in laser light interacts with the nerve endings, and it activates them. The main response that really helps smokers is it gets the body to release endorphins," said William Thiry, founder and program director of the Laser Wellness Center in Germantown, where Servis recently received his final treatment.

Those endorphins and the relaxation the laser coaxes out help offset the withdrawal symptoms of nicotine addiction, which are frequently compared to those of heroin addiction in intensity.

Servis said his doctors have been on his case to quit, especially since he developed rheumatoid arthritis a few years back. He had tried many other treatments, from nicotine patches and gum to hypnosis and the prescription drug Bupropion.

The prescription, commonly marketed as Zyban or Wellbutrin, helped Servis and his wife, Nancy, quit - for a time.

"With Zyban we had quit for 18 months and we were at a New Year's Eve party," Gordon Servis said. "You're only kidding yourself when you're telling yourself you're only going to have one."

But the Servises, both retired telephone company workers who live in West Bend, are astonished by laser treatment's elimination of withdrawal symptoms.

Gordon has had no discomfort, which he said was always present with the other treatments and would drive him crazy.

"It's unbelievable. I've had absolute no cravings. It's been a very normal calm transition," Servis said.

Treatment consists of an initial application with an assessment, which takes a little more than an hour, and a couple of brief follow-up applications.

The treatment is already approved by the Food and Drug Administration, but Thiry's Wellness Center is currently part of an FDA clinical research program to study its effectiveness.

Thiry said his center may introduce laser therapy aimed at weight loss, and that the technique was also used to treat allergies, arthritis, back aches, migraines and carpal tunnel syndrome.

He said the sports teams such as the University of Minnesota, Cleveland Browns and Los Angeles Lakers use lasers to physically adjust players and minimize injuries.

"I was nervous to begin with because I really didn't have an idea or a clue of what was going to happen. It's very relaxing, it doesn't hurt," said Nancy Servis.

Servis said while the laser treatment handles the physical addiction, people still has to get used changing their daily routine to not include cigarettes.

"The habitual parts like, I'm in the car so I should light a cigarette or it's after dinner so I should light a cigarette - that you have to get over yourself," Servis said. "But the other night I woke up in the middle of the night, and the first thought that came into my mind was 'I'm a non-smoker.'"

The set of three treatments cost \$267 at the Wellness Center. Servis estimated if the treatment helped kick a pack-a-day habit, which she guessed costs about \$99 a month it would pay for itself within a few months.

Thiry said some insurance companies are covering the treatment, and many others include it as part of a flexible health care spending, or "cafeteria" account.

In West Bend, employees from Serigraph and Metalcraft have independently sought out the treatment, and smoking cessation treatments have been found to have a greater return on investment for employers.

Smokers are estimated to call in sick 50 percent more than non-smokers and can cost as much as \$1,000 per smoker in health care costs.

Thiry said smoking had killed both his grandparents, and he was always looking for a way to help his father to quit smoking.

When he first saw the treatment in Las Vegas, he investigated and found there were no laser clinics in Wisconsin.

Now, the Wellness Center opened an additional clinic in Oak Creek, to pair with the Germantown office and cover the entire Milwaukee area.

Nancy Servis said those who have the treatment still must truly want to quit, but believes the laser treatment is "a godsend."

"You get tired of coughing and tired of stinking, and just tired. Besides, it's not good for you either," Servis said.