

Why a Cryotherapy Facial Is the Best Way to Brighter, Tighter Skin

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Photographed by Irving Penn, *Vogue*, February 2003



“How’s the ice facial?” my husband Will texted me the other day. He meant to write “Cryo Facial,” the next big trend in anti-aging that, via blasts of cold vapor and light therapy, is meant to boost cell rejuvenation and collagen as well as plump the face, but I didn’t bother to correct him. I was still flying high from my 45 minutes with medical aesthetician Elena Wawrzynski, which included a microdermabrasion session, LED light therapy, and yes, freezing, ice-cold air—like negative 225 degrees Fahrenheit freezing—blown across my forehead, cheeks, neck, and chin. I wasn’t going to let a little thing like semantics ruin my chill. But, to answer his question, let’s take it back to earlier that day.

Inside the New York Dermatology Group’s new integral health and wellness wing in the Flatiron district of Manhattan, I am in a bright-white, podlike treatment room where there isn’t a speckle of dust on the counter; it’s as squeaky-clean and luxurious as can be. I lie back on a doctor’s chair—the same kind installed throughout the space by top dermatologist David Colbert, M.D., who is primarily known by his celebrity clients for having a sensei-like skill with lasers and face-changing injectables—and brace myself for what’s to come: cold.

The thing is, I’ve been burned before by cryotherapy, the stand-up, full-body “wellness” chambers that require you to strip and stand in ungodly cold temperatures produced by liquid nitrogen for roughly three minutes at a time. While it no doubt has given me a serious energy boost, I can’t seem to shake the suspicion that one particular session last year came close to giving me frostbite—think: numbness and tingling around the tips of my toes.

And while the FDA recently approved targeted cold therapy carried out by physicians for nerve damage in the shoulders, hips, and knees, the full-body “cryo chambers” that have become a wellness phenomenon have yet to receive its stamp of validation. Still, believers like Colbert, and a wave of trained medical aestheticians and facialists, are singing its praises, bringing the treatment into the arena of high-tech skin care.

Make no mistake: Cryotherapy is serious business and can cause more harm than good if placed in the wrong hands. But here, in Dr. Colbert’s office of world-class physicians, including sweet Elena, who has just placed a heated towel over my body and around the back of my neck and ears, I’m feeling ready for anything that comes my way. Even more convincing? Robin Wright, a client of Colbert’s, is supposedly a big fan of the cold facial service, too—and if she can make 52 years look like 25, I’m here for it.

Following a quick cleanse and lymphatic drainage, Elena performs microdermabrasion, which involves the use of crystals to deeply exfoliate and brighten the face. “Are you ready?” she asks. I nod my head yes, careful to not loosen my eye protectors. At first, it is totally fine—a cold breeze, not unlike the one I endured all winter long in Rockaway Beach, New York, where I live. But then, the chill gets more intense, and I swear I start to feel tiny ice flakes fall from the device swirling overhead. Many minutes pass until I remember to keep breathing. But I brave the cold, like a true New Yorker, and soon enough, it’s over. Elena removes my shades and tells me I can open my eyes—which, well, is kind of difficult to do. The freezing cold temperature penetrated my pores so deeply, it left me with this blanket of cold cushioning my eye sockets. It feels weird, a bit extraterrestrial, but kind of great, too—like I just woke up from a deep sleep in some kind of faraway glacial land. I touch my face and sure enough, everything feels tighter.

Before I can catch a glimpse of the results in the mirror, a heat lamp-looking device is secured around my face and neck—delivering red LED light therapy, which helps increase radiance and calm redness. Now baking, I daydream of summer vacation in Ely, Minnesota, where I once spent hours flip-flopping between freezing cold lake water and a woodburning sauna. The constant change in temperatures became addictive—not just because of the thrill of it all, but because of how great my friends and I felt afterwards. Rejuvenated and calm, similar to a first sip of ice-cold beer after a long, hot run.

And though in that spotless room in the city there was absolutely no physical exertion involved, my face appears brighter, the lines around the corners of my eyes seem smoother, and my lips and cheeks look more pillowy than ever before, due to all the blood rushing to them. As for that blemish? It’s still there, but much fainter—only a day or two away from disappearing altogether. While gathering my belongings, I feel an espresso-like jolt of energy. The following weekend, the results just seem to get better, and at a family wedding, my cousin won’t stop telling me how great I look. On that day, in the summer heat, I find myself longing to feel the big chill again—and soon.