

Acne sufferer sees the light
Siri Agrell: National Post, May 20, 2005

Adult acne sufferer Victoria Folinias receives a special light treatment in the office of dermatologist Fred Weksberg. The light works with a drug to kill acne bacteria.

For two days this week, Victoria Folinias sat inside her Toronto apartment watching soap operas and hiding her face from the world.

The 29-year-old suffers from severe adult acne, and has spent more than a decade looking at the ground and praying that the people she encounters will not notice her skin.

"It totally ruined my life," she said this week. "I sound like a troll, but I did not like the daylight."

In the past, she has refused to go to school or out with friends, but now she spends hours inside for a different reason.

For the past four months, she's been receiving photodynamic treatment (PDT), a relatively new means of treating severe acne blemishes, and it has given Ms. Folinias new hope for unblemished skin.

Every four weeks, her face is treated with a medicinal compound called Levulan, which is left on for up to two hours to make its way deep inside the pores where the acne bacteria reside.

Then, with a pair of protective sunglasses over her eyes, Ms. Folinias is placed under a special light, called a Blu-U light, which activates the compound and it starts attacking the bacteria.

The treatment has worked where pills, scrubs, peels and cosmetics have failed, Ms. Folinias said, but it requires her to spend two days a month shielding her face from the light of day, because natural light can stimulate the Levulan to continue working.

Dr. Fred Weksberg, a well-known Toronto dermatologist, recommended the treatment to Ms. Folinias and said it is gaining in popularity among his patients.

"We're finding more and more uses for it all the time," he said. "It's a very easy treatment to do."

The two most effective uses for PDT, he said, are severe acne and the treatment of precancerous spots.

Using the same technique, Dr. Weksberg says he can now eradicate numerous sun spots that would have put his patients in danger of developing cancer.

He used to treat such spots with liquid nitrogen, burning each spot off one by one. Now he can treat a large area of skin quickly and effectively, he says.

The treatment costs \$428 for each session, but Ms. Folinias said it is covered by her drug plan.

That's nothing compared to the money she pours into makeup, face wash and spa treatments. "We're talking about 11 years of trying to deal with this," she said. "I've spent thousands of dollars."



Ms. Folinas had no pimples in high school, and remembers gossiping about the acne-prone.

She tried taking Accutane, the popular acne-treating medication, but said the side effects were too much for her. She suffered from terrible nausea and was subjected to monthly bloodwork that showed the medication was raising her cholesterol.

"It's supposed to work wonders, and I know other people who swear by it, but it was just too much for me," she said.

After her first PDT session, Ms. Folinas was hoping for a miracle. Her boyfriend had seen Dr. Weksberg on television and gave her the \$100 consultation fee as a Valentine's Day present.

She has no "before" pictures because she would not allow her photo to be taken unless she was wearing layers of caked-on makeup. "I used my concealer as foundation," she said.

She did not even want to remove her makeup when she arrived for her first appointment with Dr. Weksberg, and revealed her acne to him only reluctantly.

After three treatments, her acne is still visible, but only in two small outbreaks on her face.

"I didn't know what to expect," she said of the first treatment. "I went home and stared at my skin in the mirror waiting for something to happen before my eyes."

Her cheeks are scarred with pock marks from the violent pimples that used to cover her face, and she hopes to get a laser treatment to smooth them out after her treatment is complete.

Dr. Weksberg said four treatments can control acne-causing bacteria for up to a year, and can sometimes eradicate it completely.

Ms. Folinas would settle for momentary relief, if it would mean she could go outside during the day with confidence.

It's not about looking beautiful," she said. "It's about being comfortable in my own skin."

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