

Take a Deep Breath

More and more cosmetic surgery patients are healing by inhaling.

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If you are contemplating having personal-improvement work done, you might want to consider spending some post-op time inside a seven-foot-long acrylic tube. That's right, Hyperbaric oxygen therapy, long used by burn victims, is gaining popularity with cosmetic surgery patients.

The theory behind hyperbaric's healing power is that wounds, when barraged with oxygen, heal more quickly. Hyperbaric oxygen therapy delivers pure oxygen to the body in a highly pressurized environment. The process increases tissue oxygenation levels. This promotes healing, reduces swelling and bruising, and improves circulation. Hyperbaric chambers have been used to treat victims of stroke, brain injury, carbon monoxide poisoning and even chronic fatigue syndrome.

Lately hyperbaric therapy has become something of a status symbol among the cosmetic-surgery set. Why spend three weeks behind closed doors when a week's worth of hyperbaric sessions will allow you to "go public" in half that time. "After my five sessions, I went to see my surgeon" recalls Susan Paige, a 50ish Newport Beach attorney who recently had a face lift. "He said I looked like I had been through six weeks of recovery. It had only been 10 days."

If the idea of hyperbaric therapy appeals to you, you need venture no further than Rancho Mirage. Last September, Rancho Mirage Hyperbarics opened its doors in hopes of cashing in on the desert's large cosmetic surgery industry. Owner Alden Elliott Hubble, who became a hyperbaric convert herself after undergoing treatment for chronic Lyme disease, figured the desert was a great place for a freestanding hyperbaric center. "I was so impressed with what the oxygen chamber did for me," she explains. "It makes sense that it helps cosmetic surgery patients heal because of the way the body uses oxygen."

Virtually all of Hubble's marketing efforts are aimed at the area's cosmetic surgeons. (Hyperbaric therapy is available only with a doctor's prescription.) Though RMH does treat patients for other problems, about 60 percent of its business is cosmetic surgery-based. The rest comes from oral surgery and general wound-care patients.

Tucked away in an attractive Spanish-style medical office building on Country Club Drive, Rancho Mirage Hyperbarics sees about five patients daily. The reception room is stocked with videos which patients can watch during their 60-90 minute session. Titles include *Anna and the King*, *Mask* and the hit film *My Best Friend's Wedding*.

Two seven-by-four-foot clear acrylic and steel cylinders await patients in the actual treatment room. Each cylinder contains a narrow bed with a television set mounted above it. The chambers remind this reporter of the iron lungs seen in 1950s films about polio victims.

Patients encased in the tubes watch videos, listen to surround-sound music or catnap during the perfectly comfortable procedure. The only sensation you may be aware of is

that of an airplane cabin pressurizing — because that's exactly what's happening in the chamber.

Nannette Ericson of Borrego Springs went to RMH after her face lift and laser surgery. She was quite satisfied with the results of her "beauty session." Ms. Ericson said her bruising was reduced but some swelling did return after a few days. Approximately five sessions, at about \$200 a session, are recommended by the center for their cosmetic surgery patients.

While hyperbaric devotees swear by the treatment, the mainstream medical community has been hesitant to fully endorse it. That seems to be changing, though. The state of Texas recently recognized hyperbaric therapy as a viable treatment for brain injury patients — it just mandated insurance company coverage for the procedure. Medicare recipients can now receive hyperbaric therapy for cases of carbon monoxide intoxication, thermal burns, decompression illness ("the bends"), brain injuries, strokes and to promote healing of sutures following amputations.

Currently there are around 300 freestanding privately owned hyperbaric facilities nationwide. Most have opened in the past five years or so. A number of Southern California hospitals also have them. The Grossman Burn Center at Sherman Oaks Hospital uses hyperbaric therapy for both smoke inhalation and burns. Long Beach Memorial has five chambers, and the University of California at San Diego Medical Center uses a large 12-person chamber with full life support/critical care capabilities.

But does hyperbaric therapy actually speed up cosmetic surgery healing enough to be cost effective? "I would recommend it for smokers and people with healing problems like those with diabetes, asthma and lung ailments," says Beverly Hills plastic surgeon Dr. Ryan Stanton. "For a patient in good physical shape with good nutrition and no healing problems, I don't think it makes enough of a difference healing time-wise to validate the cost," he adds.

Dr. James Wells, a Long Beach plastic surgeon and a nationally known experienced cosmetic surgeon is a bit more open to the benefits of hyperbaric therapy in a cosmetic surgery application. "It's not quackery and it may reduce early swelling on face-lift patients. It may have a role to play."

In addition to Rancho Mirage Hyperbarics' equipment, Dr. Neal Rouzier, a Palm Springs family practice physician, has a hyperbaric chamber at his Tahquitz Canyon Way office. He uses it for hard-to-heal wounds as well as cosmetic surgery patients.

So if you're having cosmetic surgery and have an extra thousand to spend, hyperbaric therapy may be for you.

A word of caution, however, if, like I am, you happen to be claustrophobic. While hyperbaric chamber operators claim that claustrophobia isn't really a problem (they point to the fact that the machine is see-through and there is always an attendant in the room) this reporter, a closet (you should pardon the expression) claustrophobe, would still find it difficult being locked up in one for 10 minutes, let alone an hour. Your call.