

Your Health

Knifeless Surgery's Cutting-Edge Techniques

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Last October, **Janice Hong** of Los Angeles decided to try a new procedure called **ThermaCool** to get rid of the lines between her mouth and her chin, and tighten the area between her mouth and cheeks. ThermaCool zaps the skin with a combination of a cooling spray and radiofrequency energy administered through a handheld device. Hong, aged 50, liked the fact that there was no recovery time afterwards--she could go right back to work following the 90 minutes in the doctor's office. (Hong happens to be a nurse for the doctor who performed it--a facial plastic surgeon.) It's taken a few months to see the results, but she's pleased so far. "It's helped my Botox injections last longer," says Hong.

ThermaCool represents a growing trend in medical treatments away from traditional open surgery--which has longer recovery periods, often a higher risk of injury or death, and typically costs more--toward "knifeless," or minimally invasive, procedures. Among the nearly 6.9 million cosmetic treatments performed in the United States in 2002, nonsurgical procedures outnumbered surgical procedures by more than 3-to-1, according to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. A big driver was the spread in popularity of Botox injections, which temporarily remove wrinkles from parts of the face.

Though no one tracks the total number of noninvasive or minimally invasive surgeries across the board, medical device makers say the trend is similar for other types of surgery as well--be it to relieve back pain, implant coronary stents, or shrink the stomachs of very obese people. Companies are in the process of testing a device that will replace lung volume reduction surgery for patients with emphysema and repair heart valves by going through the skin.