

Need to quit smoking? Try laser therapy

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HOPEWELL TWP. - If there's anything that could make an ex-smoker fall off the wagon, it's a flood.

So there was Bruce Hill of Darlington Township two weeks ago, staring down a flight of stairs at 3 feet of water in his basement. Hill's house was among more than 100 homes damaged by flooding in northern Beaver County on May 22.

But Hill, then more than a month removed from his last drag on a cigarette, said he didn't light up when he saw the water, or even have an urge to. He said he probably would have chain-smoked until long after the water receded if not for the laser therapy he received in Hopewell Township in late April to help him kick his three-decades-old habit.

"If that flood didn't make me start smoking again, I don't think anything will," said Hill, 51.

Low-level laser therapy is a new weapon in the war on nicotine addiction - at least, in the United States it is.

Not yet approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, the smoking-cessation treatment is being studied on a clinical-trial basis and has been available in this country less than three years. The procedure has been available in Canada and Europe for nearly 20 years.

Health Awareness Laser Therapy on Gringo Road in Hopewell has been offering the procedure since February. To date, Sandra and Gene Kuglics of Health Awareness said they know of only one past patient for whom the procedure hasn't worked. About 60 people have received it, they said.

They decided to offer the procedure after Gene, a 40-year smoker who, on average, went through 1½ packs a day, had it done in Canada in May 2003. Before then, he was a chain-smoking accountant while his wife ran a naturopathy practice in Bridgewater and, then, Hopewell.

Gene hasn't smoked since, and is now a laser technician (it took the couple about a week to complete the training) at their Hopewell business. He's performed about half of the procedures done there.

The procedures are as easy as, well, sitting in a chair for a half-hour, which is what you do while one of the Kuglics presses a low-level laser upon various points on your ears, face and hands. Sandra said the procedure is a modern form of acupuncture that releases pleasure-causing endorphins in the body, as cigarettes do. It costs \$300, about as much as a pack-a-day smoker spends on cigarettes over two months.

Because the procedure is so new here, it's impossible to tell whether it's the answer for smokers who want to quit. But several local people are convinced.

"I tried about everything - the patch, nicotine gum, quitting cold turkey. None of it worked. I was pretty skeptical of that. But I had a friend who tried it, so I figured what the heck. I haven't smoked since I had it done three weeks ago, much less had an urge to," said Tom Stoner, Aliquippa's city administrator, a 2½-pack-a-day smoker for 30 years.

"I feel like I have more energy, I'm not hacking all the time, and doing things like normal yard work doesn't leave me winded," Stoner said, adding that being around other smokers hasn't bothered him, either.

