

# Zapping the smoking habit

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By **GLORIA CARR** STAFF WRITER

Rick Nickel did not know what to expect.

He had heard about laser therapy but did not know how it was done or how it worked.

Last November, Nickel's employer, Westin O'Hare Hotel in Rosemont, had a special promotion during the Great American Smokeout. They offered to pay for three employees to undergo a laser therapy provided by Chicago-based Acculaser Therapy. Nickel, 29, had been trying to quit smoking since the birth of his 9-month-old daughter, Marley.

"Since the treatment, I have yet to have a serious craving," said the Lake in the Hills resident. The laser therapy's success has him "amazed," he says. "It literally changed everything in one day."

Acculaser Therapy president Marco Catanese says laser therapy is a relatively new treatment in the U.S., although it has been used in Canada and Europe for more than 20 years. Canadian firms claim an 80 to 90 percent success rate, he says. Results vary among individuals, depending on their level of commitment, he says.

"If someone is not ready and committed to quit, there is nothing in the world that will change that," Catanese said. "Our success rate varies on the individual."

In July 2005, Acculaser Therapy opened in Chicago. It has three suburban locations, in Northbrook, Waukegan and Hillside. Catanese started the business after he, himself, underwent laser therapy. He smoked a pack everyday for 10 years.

The therapy is based on traditional acupuncture but instead of using needles, lasers are used, he says. Lasers stimulate 35 different pressure points on a person's ears, face, hands and legs. Stimulating each pressure point releases endorphins, the natural chemicals that make you feel good, Catanese says.

"It's almost a natural high feeling," he said. "They feel more relaxed or calm. What that is going to do is similar to exercise and getting a massage. What it does is minimize the irritability of the withdrawal period and minimize the amount of cravings people have."

Treatments, costing \$289 for a single session, take about 45 minutes and do not hurt, he says. Most people only require one session.

A pulsating sensation is felt on the pressure points but it is considered a non-invasive treatment, Catanese says. The laser is more effective than tradition needles because it covers a larger area of the pressure points with the added benefit of the electrical stimulation, he says.

If a client is having cravings, a mini-treatment or "booster" is given, free of charge. But, if a client begins smoking again, the whole treatment must be redone, he says.

"People are always skeptical about it, there's no question about that," Catanese said. "It's one of those things it's hard to explain until (they undergo it)."

Smoking is chemically addictive as well as psychologically addictive, he said. The laser therapy helps with the physical withdrawal symptoms while the firm encourages clients to work on the psychological factors as well. Clients are told to cut back on caffeine and alcohol, both triggers for cravings, he says.

Nickel's trigger was simply driving in his car. He always smoked a cigarette on his way to work so he had to find a distraction. He says he started recording music to CD's to keep his mind off the craving.

He started smoking more than 10 years ago, just socially.

"All of a sudden, I couldn't live without it," Nickel said. He smoked a pack a day but started cutting down after Marley was born, at his wife Melissa's urging. By November, he was down to three quarters of a pack a day.

He tried nicotine patches and gum but nothing was working, he says.

"It's just so hard," he said.

Nickel was ready to "absolutely ready" quit by the time the Great American Smokeout rolled around.

He got the treatment and had his first test the following weekend when he had to attend a wedding. He held a surprise birthday party for his wife weeks later. Those were instances when he would usually be smoking, he says. But, Nickel did not smoke at either event.

"It's the only thing that has worked," he said.

He has had two friends undergo treatment and a co-worker, who used to be his smoking buddy. Nickel said he is not certain if everyone reacts the same way to the treatment, but it has worked for him and his friends.

His wife is amazed, too, at the results.

"She is so happy," Nickel said. "It obviously saves money, it's good for my health and good for her health and the baby's health."