



Medical Spas - What You Need to Know

Medical spa. It sounds so soothing. It evokes images of candles, beautiful music, warmth and pampering. Spahhhh! The words alone can make one relax.

Medical spas are marketing vehicles for medical procedures. If a spa offers medical procedures, it must be owned by physicians. The use of the term “medical spa” is used for advertising purposes to make the procedures seem more appealing. In reality, however, it is the practice of medicine.

There is no harm in seeking pampering or in wanting to look better. A visit to a spa may provide a needed respite from our stressful lives, and treatments that make us look better often make us feel better. The Medical Board of California, however, is concerned when medicine is being marketed like a pedicure, and consumers are led to believe that being injected, lasered, and resurfaced requires no more thought than changing hair color.

Medical treatments should be performed only by medical professionals. There is risk to any procedure, however minor, and consumers should be aware of those risks. While it is illegal for unlicensed personnel to provide these types of treatments, consumers should be aware that some persons and firms are operating illegally. Cosmetologists, while licensed professionals and highly qualified in superficial treatments such as facials and microdermabrasion, may never inject the skin, use lasers, or perform medical-level dermabrasion or skin peels. Those types of treatments must be performed by qualified medical personnel. In California, that means a physician, or a registered nurse or physician assistant under the supervision of a physician.

Patients must know the qualifications of persons to whom they are entrusting their health. Those seeking cosmetic procedures should know that the person performing them is medically qualified and experienced. Specifically, patients should:

- 1. Know who will perform the procedure and his or her licensing status:** If a physician is performing the treatment, you should ask about his or her qualifications. Is the doctor a specialist in these procedures? Is he or she Board-certified in an appropriate specialty? Licensing status may be verified at the Board’s website at www.mbc.ca.gov, “Verify a License.” Board certification status may be verified at www.abms.org.

continued on back

If a registered nurse or physician assistant will be doing the procedure, what are his or her qualifications? Where is the doctor who is supervising them? Are they really being supervised, or are they acting alone with a paper-only supervisor? (Although the physician does not have to be onsite, he or she must be immediately reachable.) Again, you should check the supervising doctor's credentials, as well as those of the nurse or physician assistant. Those websites are www.rn.ca.gov and www.pac.ca.gov.

- 2. Be fully informed about the risks:** All procedures carry risks, and conscientious practitioners will fully disclose them. Medical professionals have an ethical responsibility to be realistic with their patients and tell them what they need to know. Use caution if procedures are being heavily marketed with high-pressure sales techniques promising unrealistic results.
- 3. Observe the facility and its personnel:** Medical procedures should be performed in a clean environment. While one cannot see germs, one can see if the facility looks clean and personnel wash their hands, use gloves, and use sound hygienic practices.
- 4. Ask about complications, and who is available to handle them:** If you should have an adverse reaction, you want to know who will be there to help. Who should you call, and what hospital or facility is available where the physician can see you? Qualified physicians have facilities or privileges at a hospital where they can handle emergencies.
- 5. Don't be swayed by advertisements and promises of low prices:** There are a host of medical professionals offering competent, safe cosmetic procedures. If they are being offered at extremely low prices, there is a good possibility that what they are advertising is not what will be delivered. Genuine Botox, Collagen, Restalyne, and other injections are expensive. If someone is offering an injection for \$50, when the going rate at a physician's office is \$500, then you can be sure it's not the real McCoy. There have been tragic cases of unscrupulous practitioners injecting industrial silicone and toxic counterfeit drugs that have made patients critically ill, caused disfigurement, or resulted in death.

Know that there is a substantial financial cost to obtaining qualified treatments, as well as some risk. If you want the best results, do your homework and only trust those who demonstrate competence and caution.

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