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CIRCLE OF HEALTH

New treatment helps prevent potential growth of port wine stain birthmarks

By Denise Dador

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For people with port wine stain birthmarks, laser surgery is one way to soften the appearance.

Treatment can be uncomfortable, and in the past, some doctors recommended waiting until a child was a few years old and could better tolerate anesthesia.

New improvements to laser devices means for some, the earlier the better.

Nineteen-month-old Riley Shehigian is in constant motion. But even in those rare times when she's still, you can see the red birthmark she was born with covering the left side of her face.

Chandra Shehigian, Riley's mother, said, "They said, 'Oh, it's just bruising from labor and birth,' but it didn't go away."

Dermatologists diagnosed the port wine stain birthmark when Riley was 5 days old.

Five days later, doctors began treatment.

"For her sake we wanted to treat her, and we wanted to treat her young. Hopefully she won't remember what she went through," said Grant Shehigian, Riley's father.

Using a device called the V-Beam laser doctors delivered quick pulses to the red area of Riley's face.

"The laser, it goes through the skin, heats up the blood. That heat expands and destroys the lining of the vessel, hopefully destroying the vessel wall," said Leonard Bernstein, MD, a dermatologist at Laser and Skin Surgery Center.

The laser allows doctors to treat a section about the size of a dime, and then repeat until they've lasered the entire birthmark.

Bernstein said, "The treatment of an infant is safe, but it does have the feel of a rubber band snapping on the surface of the skin."

Bernstein said the updated laser device makes treatment easier on patients since it's faster with no need for anesthesia.

Grant said, "The fact that someone can't recognize it. That's the goal. That's the hope."

Other treatments have been tried for the treatment of port wine stains, including freezing, surgery and radiation.

Doctors say laser therapy is the only one that destroys the malformed blood vessels without causing damage to the skin.

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