

From Scalpel to Light Beam: The Expanding Role of Lasers in Dentistry

Dr. Pooja Gandhi, BDS¹, Dr Bipanjot Singh Grewal, BDS^{2*}, Dr. Salma Ashna Jurat, MD³, Dr. Sree Rekha Movva, BDS⁴, Dr. Deep Solanki, BDS, MPH⁵, Dr. Sowmya Yelagandula, BDS⁶, Dr. Sandeep Singh, MDS⁷

¹Government Dental College and Hospital, Jamnagar, Gujarat, India

²Shaheed Kartar Singh Sarabha Dental College & Hospital, Ludhiana, Punjab, India

³Kabul Medical University, Afghanistan

⁴Kamineni Institute of Dental Sciences. Sreepuram, Akkinapallivari Lingotam, Telangana, India

⁵Ahmedabad Dental College & Hospital, Ahmedabad, Gujarat India. Tulane University, LA, USA

⁶NTR university of Health Sciences, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh

⁷Army College of Dental Sciences, Secunderabad, India

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*Corresponding author: Dr Bipanjot Singh Grewal, BDS

Shaheed Kartar Singh Sarabha Dental College & Hospital, Ludhiana, Punjab, India

Abstract

Laser dentistry has emerged as a significant advancement in modern dental practice, offering a minimally invasive alternative to conventional instruments such as scalpels and rotary devices. Its growing popularity is driven by improved precision, enhanced patient comfort, reduced postoperative complications, and expanding clinical applications across multiple dental specialties. This narrative review aims to explore the expanding role of lasers in dentistry, focusing on their fundamental principles, clinical applications, advantages, limitations, and future directions. The literature consistently highlights benefits such as reduced bleeding, decreased pain, faster healing, and improved patient acceptance. However, challenges including high cost, operator dependency, learning curve, and variability in clinical evidence continue to limit universal adoption. Overall, laser dentistry represents a transformative tool in contemporary dental care, with strong potential for further integration into routine practice as technology advances and evidence continues to grow.

Keywords: Laser dentistry, Minimally invasive dentistry, Dental technology, Photobiomodulation, Wound healing.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Dentistry has undergone significant technological advancements over the past few decades, transitioning from conventional mechanical instruments such as scalpels and rotary drills to more sophisticated and minimally invasive modalities. Traditional dental procedures, while effective, are often associated with patient discomfort, noise, vibration, and postoperative complications such as pain and bleeding. These limitations have driven the search for alternative techniques that improve precision and patient experience.

The introduction of laser technology into dentistry in the latter half of the 20th century marked a pivotal shift in clinical practice. Since the first dental laser application by Theodore Maiman in 1960, lasers have been increasingly adopted across various dental specialties. Their ability to perform precise tissue

ablation with minimal damage to surrounding structures has positioned them as a promising alternative to conventional tools. [1,2]

Laser dentistry refers to the use of focused light energy to perform a wide range of dental procedures involving both hard and soft tissues. LASER is an acronym for Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation. Depending on the wavelength and energy settings, dental lasers can cut, vaporize, or coagulate tissues with high precision. [2]

The significance of laser dentistry lies in its minimally invasive nature, improved hemostasis, reduced need for anesthesia, and enhanced patient comfort. Various types of lasers, including diode, CO₂, Nd: YAG, and erbium lasers, are currently utilized in clinical practice, each with specific indications and advantages. [2,3]

In recent years, there has been a substantial increase in the use of laser technology in dentistry, driven by advancements in equipment, growing patient demand for painless procedures, and expanding clinical applications. Despite these developments, the adoption of lasers remains variable due to factors such as cost, required training, and inconsistent evidence regarding their superiority over conventional methods. A comprehensive evaluation of the existing literature is therefore essential to critically assess the effectiveness, advantages, and limitations of laser dentistry. This review aims to synthesize current knowledge and provide clarity on its role in modern clinical practice. [3,4] The aim of this literature review is to evaluate the expanding role of lasers in dentistry by analyzing their clinical applications, advantages, limitations, and outcomes. It seeks to provide an evidence-based overview of laser use across various dental disciplines and to assess their effectiveness compared to conventional treatment modalities.

2. METHODOLOGY

This narrative review was conducted using a comprehensive search of electronic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar, to identify relevant literature on laser dentistry in clinical practice. A combination of keywords such as “laser dentistry,” “dental lasers,” “clinical applications,” “soft tissue lasers,” and “hard tissue lasers” was used to retrieve appropriate articles. Additional studies were identified through manual searching of reference lists of selected papers. Studies included in this review were primarily peer-reviewed articles published in English that focused on the clinical applications, advantages, limitations, and outcomes of laser use in dentistry. Both original research articles and review papers were considered. Studies that were outdated, not available in full text, or not directly relevant to the topic were excluded. As a narrative review, this study has certain limitations. The selection of articles may be subject to selection bias, and the absence of a systematic approach may limit the reproducibility of the findings. Additionally, variations in study design, sample size, and methodology across the included literature may affect the consistency of the conclusions drawn.

3. FUNDAMENTALS OF LASER DENTISTRY

Laser dentistry is based on the application of highly concentrated light energy that interacts with biological tissues in a controlled and predictable manner. The behavior of lasers in clinical settings is determined by their physical properties, tissue interaction characteristics, and the specific type of laser used for different dental procedures. [5,6]

The fundamental principles of lasers include wavelength, energy output, and emission modes. Wavelength determines the depth of tissue penetration and the type of tissue interaction, as different oral tissues selectively absorb specific wavelengths. Energy is

typically measured in joules and influences the extent of tissue ablation or coagulation. Laser emission may occur in continuous-wave, pulsed, or gated modes, each affecting heat distribution and clinical precision. Proper control of these parameters is essential to ensure safe and effective clinical outcomes. [7,8]

Several types of lasers are currently used in dentistry, each with specific properties and indications. Diode lasers are commonly used for soft tissue procedures due to their affinity for pigmented tissues and hemoglobin, making them effective for periodontal therapy and minor surgical procedures. CO₂ lasers are highly absorbed by water and are primarily used for soft tissue surgery due to their excellent cutting ability and hemostatic effect. Nd: YAG lasers penetrate deeper into tissues and are often used for periodontal therapy and bacterial reduction. Erbium lasers, including Er: YAG and Er,Cr:YSGG, have high absorption in water and hydroxyapatite, making them suitable for both hard and soft tissue applications such as caries removal and bone surgery. [9,10]

Laser-tissue interaction is governed by four main processes: absorption, reflection, scattering, and transmission. Absorption is the most critical factor, as it determines how laser energy is taken up by target tissues and converted into heat, leading to cutting, ablation, or coagulation. Reflection refers to the portion of laser energy that bounces off the tissue surface without interaction, while scattering causes dispersion of energy within tissues, potentially reducing precision. Penetration depth depends on wavelength and tissue composition, influencing both therapeutic effectiveness and safety. Understanding these interactions is essential for optimizing clinical outcomes and minimizing collateral tissue damage. [10, 11]

4. CLINICAL APPLICATIONS OF LASER DENTISTRY

Laser technology has become increasingly integrated into modern dental practice due to its precision, minimally invasive nature, and ability to improve patient comfort and clinical outcomes. Its applications span across soft tissue and hard tissue procedures, as well as endodontics, oral surgery, and esthetic dentistry. The versatility of lasers allows clinicians to tailor treatment approaches based on tissue type, wavelength selection, and desired biological response.

4.1 Soft Tissue Procedures

One of the most widely established uses of lasers in dentistry is in soft tissue management. In procedures such as gingivectomy and gingivoplasty, lasers offer superior precision in contouring gingival tissues while simultaneously providing excellent hemostasis. This reduces intraoperative bleeding, improves visibility, and often eliminates the need for sutures. Postoperative discomfort is also generally

reduced due to decreased tissue trauma and nerve sealing effects. [12]

Frenectomy procedures also benefit significantly from laser use. Compared to conventional scalpel techniques, lasers reduce operative time, minimize bleeding, and often allow for a more comfortable postoperative recovery. Pediatric and anxious patients, in particular, benefit from the reduced invasiveness of laser-assisted frenectomies. [13]

In periodontal therapy, lasers are used as an adjunct to scaling and root planing. They assist in the removal of diseased epithelial tissue, bacterial decontamination of periodontal pockets, and reduction of inflammation. This contributes to improved periodontal healing and pocket depth reduction in selected cases. Laser therapy is also effective in managing oral ulcers and other mucosal lesions. Low-level laser therapy can promote biostimulation, reducing pain and accelerating epithelial healing. Patients with recurrent aphthous ulcers often experience rapid symptomatic relief following laser application. [13]

4.2 Hard Tissue Applications

Hard tissue laser applications primarily involve erbium-based lasers, which are capable of interacting effectively with enamel and dentin due to their affinity for water and hydroxyapatite. In caries removal, lasers can selectively ablate decayed tissue while preserving healthy tooth structure, aligning with the principles of minimally invasive dentistry. This selective removal reduces the risk of over-preparation compared to conventional rotary instruments. [14]

In cavity preparation, lasers offer an alternative to traditional drilling, often eliminating vibration, noise, and the associated anxiety experienced by patients. The absence of a rotary bur can enhance patient comfort, particularly in pediatric and needle-phobic individuals. Additionally, laser-prepared cavities may exhibit microstructural changes that can improve adhesion of restorative materials in certain situations. Enamel etching is another important application, where lasers can be used as an alternative or adjunct to acid etching. Laser conditioning alters the enamel surface by creating micro-irregularities that enhance mechanical retention of restorative materials. Although not universally used as a standalone method, it can be beneficial in specific restorative protocols. [15]

4.3 Endodontic Applications

In endodontics, laser technology is primarily used to enhance disinfection and improve the cleanliness of the root canal system. One of its key applications is root canal disinfection, where laser energy helps reduce microbial load within complex canal anatomies. The ability of laser light to penetrate dentinal tubules beyond the reach of conventional irrigants enhances its effectiveness in eliminating persistent bacteria. [16]

Another important application is smear layer removal. Following mechanical instrumentation, a smear layer composed of organic and inorganic debris can remain on canal walls, potentially interfering with sealing ability. Laser activation, particularly when combined with irrigants, can help disrupt and remove this layer, improving the adaptation of obturation materials and enhancing long-term treatment success. [17]

4.4 Oral Surgery

Laser technology has significantly improved outcomes in oral surgical procedures. In biopsies, lasers allow for precise incision with minimal bleeding, which preserves the integrity of the tissue specimen while improving patient comfort. The reduced need for suturing and better hemostasis make postoperative management simpler. [18]

Lesion excision is another important application, especially for benign soft tissue growths. Lasers enable clean and controlled removal of lesions with reduced collateral tissue damage. The coagulative effect also reduces the risk of postoperative bleeding and infection, promoting faster healing. Hemostasis is one of the most valuable advantages of lasers in oral surgery. The ability to coagulate blood vessels during incision leads to a clear surgical field and significantly reduces intraoperative blood loss. This is particularly beneficial in patients with bleeding disorders or those on anticoagulant therapy, where conventional surgery may pose higher risks. [19]

4.5 Esthetic and Prosthodontic Uses

In esthetic dentistry, lasers are commonly used for crown lengthening procedures. By precisely removing excess gingival tissue and, when necessary, underlying bone, lasers help expose adequate tooth structure for restorative procedures while maintaining periodontal health. This leads to improved esthetic outcomes and better restoration longevity. [20]

Teeth whitening is another well-known application, where lasers are used to activate bleaching agents, accelerating the whitening process. This can enhance the effectiveness of in-office bleaching procedures and reduce treatment time while achieving desirable esthetic results. Laser technology also plays an indirect role in smile design support. By enabling precise soft tissue contouring and enhancing gingival symmetry, lasers contribute to the overall esthetic harmony of the smile. When combined with digital planning and restorative procedures, laser-assisted techniques help achieve predictable and visually appealing outcomes in comprehensive esthetic treatment plans. [21]

5. ADVANTAGES OF LASER DENTISTRY

Advantages of laser dentistry include minimally invasive procedures with reduced bleeding, pain, and postoperative discomfort, along with faster healing and

improved patient comfort. It also provides high precision, better clinical control, and reduced need for anesthesia in selected cases. [22-25]

Advantage	Explanation
Minimally invasive approach	Lasers allow precise tissue removal with minimal trauma to surrounding structures, preserving healthy tissue.
Reduced pain and discomfort	Many laser procedures result in less postoperative pain due to reduced mechanical pressure and nerve ending sealing effects.
Decreased bleeding and excellent hemostasis	Laser energy coagulates blood vessels during incision, providing a clear surgical field and reducing intraoperative blood loss.
Reduced need for anesthesia	In many soft tissue procedures, lasers can reduce or eliminate the need for local anesthesia.
Faster healing and reduced inflammation	Controlled tissue interaction leads to less postoperative swelling and faster epithelial regeneration.
Improved patient comfort and acceptance	Reduced noise, vibration, and anxiety compared to conventional drills improves patient experience, especially in pediatric cases.
Sterilization effect	Laser energy has a bactericidal effect, reducing microbial load in treated areas.
Precision and control	Allows highly accurate tissue targeting, especially in delicate anatomical areas.
Reduced need for sutures	Coagulation and precise cutting often eliminate or reduce suturing requirements.
Better outcomes in medically compromised patients	Useful in patients with bleeding disorders or those on anticoagulant therapy due to improved hemostasis.

6. LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF LASER DENTISTRY

Limitations and challenges of laser dentistry include high equipment cost, requirement of specialized

training, and variability in clinical evidence supporting some applications. Additionally, improper use may lead to thermal damage to tissues and reduced cost-effectiveness in routine practice. [26-28]

Limitation/Challenge	Explanation
High cost of equipment	Dental lasers are expensive to purchase, maintain, and upgrade, limiting accessibility in many practices.
Learning curve and training requirement	Effective use requires specialized training and clinical experience to avoid misuse or tissue damage.
Limited effectiveness in certain procedures	Not all dental procedures can be replaced by lasers, especially deep restorative or complex mechanical preparations.
Risk of thermal damage	Improper settings or technique may cause overheating and damage to surrounding tissues.
Limited tactile feedback	Compared to traditional instruments, lasers provide reduced tactile sensation during procedures.
Longer treatment time in some cases	Certain laser procedures may take longer compared to conventional methods, especially in inexperienced hands.
Safety concerns	Requires strict eye protection and adherence to safety protocols to prevent accidental injury.
Equipment sensitivity and maintenance	Laser devices require careful calibration, maintenance, and can be sensitive to handling conditions.
Variable evidence base	For some applications, clinical evidence is still evolving, and superiority over conventional methods is not always definitive.
Limited availability in clinics	Not all dental institutions or clinics are equipped with laser technology.

7. SAFETY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The use of lasers in dentistry requires strict adherence to safety protocols to ensure both patient and operator protection. One of the most critical safety measures is the use of appropriate protective eyewear specific to the laser wavelength being used. Since laser beams can cause irreversible eye damage even from reflected light, eye protection is mandatory for all individuals present in the operatory. Additionally, protective measures include the use of high-volume

suction to control laser plume, proper warning signage outside treatment rooms, and controlled access to laser-operating areas. [29]

Operator training is another essential component of safe laser use. Dental professionals must undergo structured theoretical and hands-on training before incorporating lasers into clinical practice. Understanding laser physics, tissue interactions, device settings, and clinical protocols is necessary to prevent

misuse and complications. Certification courses and continuing education programs are often recommended to maintain competency and ensure safe application across different procedures. Risk management in laser dentistry involves careful patient selection, correct parameter settings, and adherence to manufacturer guidelines. Potential risks include thermal injury to soft

or hard tissues, unintended damage to adjacent structures, and improper healing outcomes if parameters are not correctly controlled. Proper documentation, informed consent, and adherence to evidence-based protocols are essential ethical requirements to ensure patient safety and maintain clinical accountability. [30,31] [Figure 1]

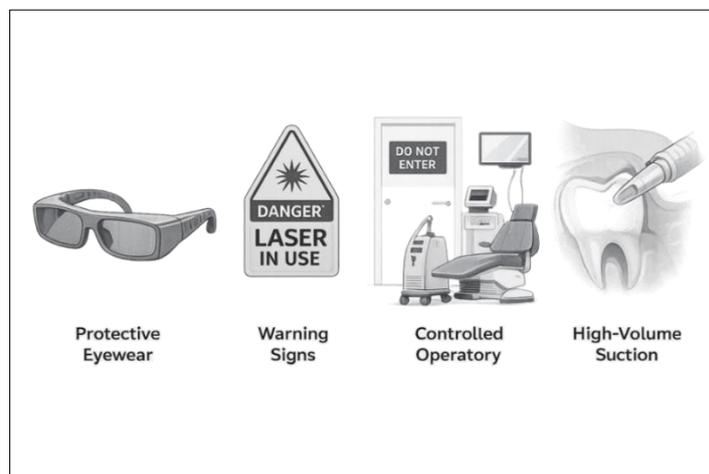


Figure 1: Laser Safety Protocol in dentistry

8. FUTURE TRENDS IN LASER DENTISTRY

The future of laser dentistry is closely linked to continuous technological advancements aimed at improving precision, efficiency, and clinical versatility. Emerging laser systems are becoming more compact, cost-effective, and user-friendly, allowing broader adoption in general dental practice. Improvements in wavelength control, pulse modulation, and energy delivery systems are expected to enhance treatment accuracy while minimizing thermal damage to tissues. [32]

Integration with digital dentistry represents a major future direction. The combination of lasers with digital scanning, computer-aided design and manufacturing [CAD/CAM], and guided surgical

systems is expected to enhance treatment planning and execution. Digital workflows will allow clinicians to perform more predictable, minimally invasive procedures with improved esthetic and functional outcomes. [33]

Expanding clinical indications also highlight the growing potential of laser dentistry. Ongoing research is exploring its applications in regenerative dentistry, implantology, and even adjunctive cancer therapy. Low-level laser therapy is also gaining attention for its role in biostimulation, pain management, and accelerated wound healing. As evidence continues to grow, lasers are expected to become more deeply integrated into mainstream dental protocols. [34] [Figure 2]

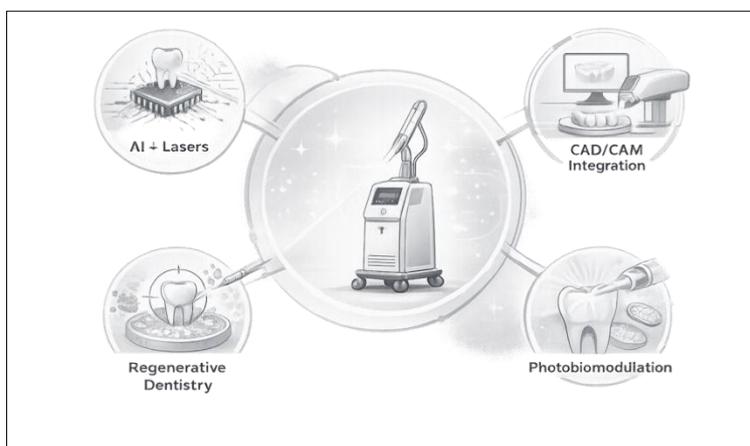


Figure 2: Future trends in laser dentistry

9. CONCLUSION

Laser dentistry has emerged as a significant advancement in modern dental practice, offering a minimally invasive alternative to conventional surgical and restorative techniques. The literature indicates that lasers provide multiple clinical benefits, including improved precision, reduced pain and bleeding, enhanced healing, and greater patient comfort. Their applications span a wide range of dental disciplines, including soft tissue surgery, hard tissue management, endodontics, oral surgery, and esthetic dentistry. Clinically, laser technology has contributed to improved treatment outcomes and has enhanced patient-centered care by reducing anxiety and discomfort associated with traditional procedures. However, limitations such as high cost, learning curve, and variability in clinical evidence must be acknowledged when integrating lasers into routine practice. Overall, laser dentistry represents a transformative tool in contemporary dental care. With continued technological innovation and expanding research evidence, its role is expected to grow further, supporting a shift toward more precise, efficient, and minimally invasive dental treatments in the future.

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