Optimizing Laser Treatment for Diabetic Macular Edema

Micropulse mode and 577-nm wavelength are an effective and safe combination.

By Rohit S. Adyanthaya, MD

Laser photocoagulation continues to play a prominent role in the treatment of diabetic macular edema (DME) despite the introduction of anti-VEGF medications. Although traditional continuous-wave laser mode has proved to be effective for DME, as shown in the Early Treatment for Diabetic Retinopathy Study\(^1\) there are a number of drawbacks including, but not limited to, permanent destruction of the photoreceptors and enlargement of laser scars into the fovea with further deterioration of vision. We are now learning that modified treatment parameters and selective laser wavelengths have the ability to produce a less destructive and more therapeutic effect.

The Conventional Laser’s Mechanism of Action

The understood mechanism of action of conventional focal lasers is to induce coagulation necrosis and permanent destruction of the retinal pigment epithelium (RPE) and photoreceptors, which in turn spurs the upregulation of inhibitors and downregulation of causes of inflammation.\(^2\) Studies have shown, however, that destruction of cells is not necessary; rather, photostimulation of the RPE can cause a transcriptional activation of cytokines and upregulation of the beneficial intracellular biological factors such as pigment epithelium-derived factor (PEDF) and other potent antiinflammatory factors.\(^3,4\)

How Micropulse Works

An alternative technology to continuous wave laser mode that has been developed is micropulse laser. Micropulse technology effectively chops a conventional mode laser beam into a train of repetitive short bursts. The pauses between the bursts allow the tissue...
to cool, preventing thermal buildup and collateral damage (Figures 1 and 2). Multiple studies have shown that micropulse laser achieves similar results to conventional laser treatment, with the added benefit of no retinal scarring, as demonstrated by fundus autofluorescence. 5-8 Additionally, microperimetry has demonstrated significant improvement in retinal sensitivity with micropulse laser. 5

**Micropulse Treatment Parameters**

As micropulse technology is relatively new, treatment parameters are still to be standardized. My approach is to first perform a test burn with the laser in the micropulse mode itself in a nonthickened area of the retina (usually nasal to the nerve). I start with 5% duty cycle, 600 mW of power, 100 µm spot size and 200-ms duration. Power is then increased by 100 mW, moving to an adjacent area each time, until a barely visible burn appears. Usually, I see a barely visible burn at around 1000 mW of power. Once that threshold has been determined, the power is halved and treatment performed (eg, if a barely visible burn was noticed at 1000 mW of micropulse power, I will treat with 500 mW of micropulse power).

Using the optical coherence tomography map as a guide and the fundus biomicroscopic exam, a confluent grid is placed directly over the areas of thickened retina and microaneurysms, leaving no space between laser applications. Because micropulse exposures limit thermal spread, it calls for the delivery of a greater number of spots with denser spacing than used for traditional conventional wavelength treatment. 6 When placing the test burn, I use 0-ms interval; however, because micropulse requires a confluent pattern over areas of thickened retina, I prefer to treat using an interval of 200 ms, as this speeds up the procedure and also avoids the need to press the foot pedal for every spot. As there is no visible burn, it is important to focus the laser beam accurately on the retina during the treatment.

**Understanding the 577-nm Yellow Wavelength**

In addition to micropulse treatment mode, selecting the best laser wavelength is an important step in increas-
Case Study

A 54-year-old Hispanic male with type 2 diabetes and hypertension for the last 8 years came to me complaining of decreased vision in the left eye. He had no history of eye problems nor any treatments in the past. His right eye had 20/20 vision, with moderate nonproliferative diabetic retinopathy with no clinically significant macular edema. His left eye was 20/80 with severe nonproliferative diabetic retinopathy with clinically significant macular edema. (Figure 3). Due to insurance issues, anti-VEGF treatments could not be initiated, so we decided to perform micropulse laser with the 577-nm laser to the left eye. For the first session, I placed laser spots in a confluent grid over the thickened area using 750 mW of power on the micropulse setting. After 3 months, the edema had significantly reduced but was not completely resolved. To address the residual edema, a second session was performed using the same settings, and after 3 months, the fovea was completely flat, and visual acuity was 20/30 (Figure 4).

Although there have been significant pharmacologic advances for the treatment of DME, laser remains an important treatment modality. As our understanding of wavelengths and treatment modalities increases, we can improve efficacy and decrease unintended collateral damage to the retina.

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