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Hair Removal Guide

As you browse the aisles of your local drugstore, you may feel a little dizzy. There are hundreds of products devoted to making the hair on your head more lustrous, clean, fragrant, and full - and just steps away, dozens more promise to get rid of your unwanted hair just as easily. Which ones work best? How do they work? And do you need any of them?

Different Types of Hair

Before removing hair, it helps to know about the different types of hair on our bodies. All hair is made of **keratin**, a hard protein that's also found in your fingernails and toenails. Hair growth begins beneath the surface of your skin at a hair root inside a hair follicle, a small tube in the skin.

You have two types of hair on your body. **Vellus** hair is soft, fine, and short. Most women have vellus hair on the chest, back, and face. It can be darker and more noticeable in some women than others - especially women with darker complexions. Vellus hair helps the body maintain a steady temperature by providing some insulation.

Terminal hair is coarser, darker, and longer than vellus hair and is the type of hair that grows on your head. When a teen reaches puberty, terminal hair starts to grow in the armpits and pubic region. On guys, terminal hair begins to grow on the face and other parts of the body such as the chest, legs, and back. Terminal hair provides cushioning and protection.

In some cases, excess hair growth, called **hirsutism** (pronounced: **hur-suh-tih-zum**), may be the result of certain medical conditions. In girls, polycystic ovary syndrome and other hormonal disorders can cause dark, coarse hair to grow on the face, especially the upper lip, and on the arms, chest, and legs. Some medications, like anabolic steroids, can also cause hirsutism.

Getting Rid of Hair

Shaving

How It Works: Using a razor, a person removes the tip of the hair shaft that has grown out through the skin. Some razors are completely disposable, some have a disposable blade, and some are electric. Guys often shave their faces, and women often shave their underarms, legs, and bikini areas.

How Long It Lasts: 1 to 3 days

Pros: Shaving is fairly inexpensive. All you need is some warm water, a razor, and if you choose, shaving gel or cream. You don't need an appointment - shaving is a do-it-yourself endeavor, resulting in smooth, hairless skin.

Cons: Razor burn, bumps, nicks, cuts, and ingrown hairs are side effects of shaving. Ingrown hairs occur when hairs are cut below the level of the skin. When the hair begins to grow, it grows within the surrounding tissue rather than growing out of the follicle. The hair curls around and starts growing into the skin, and irritation, redness, and swelling can occur at the hair follicle.

Tips: Look for blades that have safety guard wires - they minimize nicks and cuts. Also, you'll get a closer shave if you shave in the shower after your skin has been softened by warm water. Go slowly, change your blades often to avoid nicks, and use a moisturizing cream to soften the hair. Although most people shave in the opposite direction from the hair growth, if you want to avoid ingrown hairs it can help to shave in the direction the hair grows. If you have an ingrown hair, try exfoliating (removing dead skin cells with a loofah), sterilizing a pointed pair of tweezers with rubbing alcohol, and attempting to pluck out the ingrown hair.

Plucking

How It Works: Using tweezers, a person stretches the skin tightly, grips the hair close to the root, and pulls it out.

How Long It Lasts: 3 to 8 weeks

Pros: Plucking is time-consuming because you can only remove one hair at a time. However, it's inexpensive because all you need are tweezers.

Cons: Plucking can be painful, so it's best to do it only on small areas, such as the eyebrows, upper lip, and chin. If the hair breaks off below the skin, a person may get an ingrown hair. After plucking, you may notice temporary red bumps because the hair follicle is swollen and irritated.

Tips: Make sure you sterilize your tweezers with rubbing alcohol before and after use to reduce the chance of infection.

Depilatories

How They Work: A depilatory is a cream or liquid that removes hair from the skin's surface. They work by reacting with the protein structure of the hair, so the hair dissolves and can be washed or wiped away.

How Long They Last: Several days to 2 weeks

Pros: Depilatories work quickly, are readily available at drugstores and grocery stores, and are inexpensive. They're best on the leg, underarm, and bikini areas; special formulations may be used on the face and chin.

Cons: Applying depilatories can be messy and many people dislike the odor. If you have sensitive skin, you might have an allergic reaction to the chemicals in the depilatory, which may cause a rash or inflammation. Depilatories may not be as effective on people with coarse hair.

Tips: Read product directions carefully and be sure to apply the product only for the recommended amount of time for best results.

Waxing

How It Works: A sticky wax is spread on the area of skin where the unwanted hair is growing. A cloth strip is then applied over the wax and quickly pulled off, taking the hair root and dead skin cells with it. The wax can be warmed or may be applied cold. Waxing can be done at a salon or at home.

How Long It Lasts: 3 to 6 weeks

Pros: Waxing leaves the area smooth and is long lasting. Waxing kits are readily available in drugstores and grocery stores. Hair regrowth looks lighter and less noticeable than it is after other methods of hair removal, such as shaving.

Cons: Many people mention that the biggest drawback to waxing is the pain when the hair is ripped out by the root. A person may notice temporary redness, inflammation, and bumps after waxing. Professional waxing is also expensive compared to other hair removal methods.

People with diabetes should avoid waxing because they are more susceptible to infection. Also, teens who use acne medications such as tretinoin and isotretinoin may want to skip the wax because those medicines make the skin more sensitive. Teens with moles or skin irritation from sunburn should also avoid waxing.

Tips: For waxing to work, hair should be at least 1/4 inch (about 6 millimeters) long, so skip shaving for a few weeks before waxing. Waxing works best on legs, bikini areas, and eyebrows.

Electrolysis

How It Works: Over a series of several appointments, a professional electrologist inserts a needle into the follicle and sends an electric current through the hair root, killing it. A small area such as the upper lip may take a total of 4 to 10 hours and a larger area such as the bikini line may take 8 to 16 hours.

How Long It Lasts: Permanently

Pros: Electrolysis is the only type of hair removal that is permanent.

Cons: Electrolysis takes big bucks and lots of time, so it's usually only used on smaller areas such as the upper lip, eyebrows, and underarms. Many people describe the process as painful, and dry skin, scabs, scarring, and inflammation may result after treatment. Infection may be a risk if the needles and other instruments aren't properly sterilized.

Tips: Talk to your doctor if you're interested in this method. He or she may be able to recommend an electrologist with the proper credentials.

Laser Hair Removal

How It Works: A laser is directed through the skin to the hair follicle, where it stops growth. It works best on light-skinned people with dark hair because the melanin (colored pigment) in the hair absorbs more of the light, making treatment more effective.

How Long It Lasts: 6 months

Pros: This type of hair removal is long lasting and large areas of skin can be treated at the same time.

Cons: A treatment session may cost \$500 or more. Side effects of the treatment may include inflammation and redness.

Tips: Using cold packs may help diminish any inflammation after treatment. Avoiding the sun before a treatment may make results more effective.

Prescription Treatments

A cream called eflornithine is available by prescription to treat facial hair growth (generally in women). The cream is applied twice a day until the hair becomes softer and lighter - more like vellus hair. Side effects may include skin irritation and acne. Talk to your doctor or dermatologist if you are concerned about hair growth and removal.

Antiandrogen medications are another method that doctors prescribe to reduce the appearance of unwanted hair. Because the hormone androgen can be responsible for hair growth in unwanted areas, antiandrogens can block androgen production. Oral contraceptives are frequently used in conjunction with these medications to enhance their effect and to help regularize the menstrual cycle in girls who need it.

Deciding to remove body hair is a personal choice - getting rid of body hair doesn't make a person healthier, and you shouldn't feel pressured to do so if you don't want to. Some cultures view body hair as beautiful and natural, so do what feels right to you!

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