



The Thick and thin of Laser Hair Removal

For women a beautiful hairstyle frames a face. However, a hairy upper lip can denigrate the picture. For men, the virile pursuit of a full Samsonian head of hair can be of religious magnitude. Yet, a full furry back is usually better suited for a hibernating bear. Social, cultural and ethnic influences differently define attractive hairstyles and aesthetically acceptable locations of hair. For years European women refused to shed their underarm hair and certain Middle Eastern sects have glamorized facial hair. But for the majority of Americans excessive fuzz is undesirable and a nuisance. Occasionally an underlying medical condition or a specific medication may be the cause for the surplus. Assuming the hair growth is natural, as it usually is, and you want it gone what are your options for removal?

For many years women have subjected themselves to expensive and inadequate means of hair removal. Waxing is an effective method but needs to be repeated and can be quite uncomfortable. Topical agents generally are not well accepted, can cause allergies and have to be left in place for long periods of time to be effective. Electrolysis once considered the best technique for long-term reduction is time consuming, painful, expensive and needs to be repeated multiple times before lasting results are obtained. Therefore leading to the introduction of the laser as a method of precise, accurate and effective hair removal.

How does the laser work?

The laser is designed to be selective, targeting melanin the pigment in the hair follicle. However, the marked melanin is only readily available during the growth phase of the hair. Hair exists in three different stages of development and the percentage of hair in the susceptible growth phase depends on the location of the body where the hair resides. For example on the face at any one time 70% of the hair is in a growth phase whereas on



the leg only 20% of hair is in a growth phase. And because hair is only vulnerable to the laser during the growth phase it may take more treatments at increased intertreatment intervals for the leg to receive an equally effective response as the face. Also important to understand is that melanin, the target of the laser beam also exists in the skin, more so in those of darker skin color or those who have recently tanned. To safely bypass skin melanin during lasering, the outer layers of the skin are chilled. This prevents the superficial melanin from heating up and potentially injuring the skin.

With so many lasers out there which one is the best?

Recent laser technology including the Alexandrite, Diode and Yag emit a longer wavelength and are more selective for the hair follicle. Darker skinned individuals may get a better response from the increased wavelength of the diode or Yag laser as opposed to the shorter wavelength of the alexandrite laser. If you have lighter skin, as long as you are being treated with one of the described lasers you can expect a satisfying result

Is laser hair removal for me?

Conditions, which may make you a poor candidate for treatment, include a history of hypertrophic scarring, pregnancy, and certain medications. All treated patients can

expect at least a temporary hair loss. However the most permanent and best results are obtained in patients who have dark hair and light skin.

Is the hair loss permanent?

The amount of hair loss is dependent on many factors including energy of the laser, anatomical area treated, number of treatments, hair and skin color. However, in properly selected patients all laser systems have shown a reduction in hair. Even though some of the hair returns it is usually thinner, smaller and lacking pigment. In most patients approximately 20% reduction in hair can be expected with each treatment. It is important that patients realize multiple treatments are necessary for a cosmetic result. Until permanent hair loss can be proven scientifically the FDA has limited the laser companies to boasting "permanent hair reduction" only.

What can I expect if treated?

First it is important that your physician properly evaluates you. If the area to be treated has not been shaven within the last three days then you may need a quick clip. Irrespective of which laser is used you often will feel a cooling device or gel applied to your skin. Most patients do not find the laser energy to be painful, although it is not without some discomfort. For most it is very tolerable and not an unpleasant experience. For those with a lower pain threshold your physician can prescribe a topical anesthetic cream that when applied to the skin one hour prior to the treatment, should prevent any discomfort. How long the procedure will last depends on which area is treated. The facial and bikini areas can be treated within fifteen minutes, the legs or back may take up to an hour. Following the treatment the skin will be red and perhaps slightly swollen similar to waxing. Applying cooling packs and a topical gel will help soothe the irritation. Do not be alarmed if you still see hair in place or growing following the treatment. Over the next few days up to two weeks expect the hair to be pushed out.

What are the risks?

If properly counseled and treated by an experienced physician the risk are very minimal. Occasionally, blistering may occur, if it does it is important to keep these areas clean and covered with a topical antibiotic ointment. Pigmentary changes may occur especially in darker skinned individuals or those who tan. Usually this will resolve spontaneously but may be expedited with topical bleaching creams. A sunscreen with at least a 15 SPF should be worn. With current laser technology and training permanent pigmentary changes are uncommon. Although a potential risk with all types of laser treatments, scarring is so unlikely that it should not be a major concern. Today, in the hands of an experienced physician, laser hair removal should be considered a very safe venture.

What are the advantages of laser hair removal?

As laser technology continues to improve it is becoming increasingly clear that laser hair removal is rapidly becoming the best option for permanent reduction. It is less painful than waxing and tweezing. It is less time consuming and tedious than electrolysis. And while it may seem expensive for a single treatment in the long run it is actually more affordable. When you consider that the path to permanency requires only a few treatments instead of years the benefits become obvious. To determine if you are proper candidate or to answer more questions about laser hair removal contact your physician.



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