

# Hirsutism: When unwanted hair is more than a cosmetic nuisance

By Kenneth D. Osorio, M.D.

Most women don't care for the extra hair that can develop with age, especially if the hair is darker and located on the face, chest, abdomen or arms. In fact, eliminating this unwanted hair growth has spawned not only new laser techniques to permanently reduce hair, but also the development of new medications specifically designed to slow hair growth. Furthermore, 45 percent of women perceive themselves to have undesirable facial hair growth, with one in five removing the unwanted hair at least weekly. However, when is unwanted hair growth a sign of an underlying medical condition and not just a cosmetic aggravation?

In years past, little thought was given to extra hair growth in women. In fact, in the 1800s, women with excessive hair growth were utilized in traveling circuses, with the "bearded lady" drawing laughter from amused and amazed crowds. However, excessive masculinized hair growth of this extent truly is no laughing matter. Today we know this excessive, masculinized hair growth to be a condition called *hirsutism*, whose causes can be as varied as polycystic ovaries or tumors of the pituitary gland. Still, since it is normal for women

to develop more dark visible hair with age, how do we distinguish between extra hair growth of aging and actual *hirsutism*?

A key distinguishing feature of *hirsutism* is that the hair growth is in locations where women typically grow fine hair, such as above the lip, on the chin, chest, abdomen and back. The hair growth is typically coarse and black.

**"When is unwanted hair growth a sign of an underlying medical condition and not just a cosmetic aggravation?"**

This growth is due to an excess of androgens or male hormones coursing through the affected female's system. If the hair growth is accompanied by other male features such as deepening of the voice, acne or increased muscle mass, a more serious disorder, such as a hormone-secreting tumor, may need to be ruled out. However, even without these features, if unusual hair growth develops rapidly, this also warrants

medical attention, especially if female relatives have comparatively less hair growth.

Comparing one's hair growth to that of other family members is important, as race and ethnicity play a major role in the growth of body hair. For example, women of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern descent tend to have moderate to large amounts of body hair whereas Asian and Native American women have very little. One's culture can also affect the psychological impact of *hirsutism*. Although in some countries, extra hair growth can be appealing to the opposite sex, in the U.S. there is quite a social stigma associated with female *hirsutism*; consequently, the emotional impact of *hirsutism* can be severe. Since our culture can view a woman with *hirsutism* as less womanly or desirable, it is not uncommon for American *hirsute* women to experience poor self-esteem, depression and even social isolation because of the condition.

So what is the best treatment for *hirsutism*? This depends on the cause. The two most common causes are polycystic ovary syndrome (PCO) and idiopathic *hirsutism*. PCO is characterized by enlarged ovaries with multiple small cysts, which cause higher levels of androgens (male hormones) to be produced. Typically, oral contraceptives, anti-androgens and, interestingly, a diabetes medicine, metformin, may be tried in patients with PCO. Other rare causes of *hirsutism*, such as hormone-secreting tumors or adrenal hyperplasia would have completely distinct treatments.

Despite addressing the underlying disorder with medication or surgery, often excess undesired hair persists. This leaves the patient various options with how to deal with the excess hair. Sometimes just lightening the hair can make it less noticeable. Chemical depilation or waxing is frequently used. Those who desire a longer lasting solution often turn to laser hair removal since it is considerably faster than electrolysis and, in the long run, more economical than waxing. Furthermore, lasers have had excellent studies confirming their effectiveness. There is also Vaniqa, a new medication on the market, which, although it doesn't remove hair permanently, does seem to slow hair growth.

Although unwanted hair is always a nuisance, it is important to be aware of the signs of *hirsutism*, which may indicate a more serious underlying condition.

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