

LOCAL HEALTH TALK

Hirsutism easily treated

Hirsutism, or excessive hair growth in women, can dictate a serious medical condition, or it may be caused by other factors, such as heredity.

Either way, this excessive hair growth, usually on the face, lower abdomen and groin, can affect a woman's psychological well-being.

Growing excessive hair, in a masculine pattern and appearance, affects a woman's very identity as a female. For many women, the development of a mustache or beard is a source of painful embarrassment and shame.

Hirsutism may be a sign of an underlying, serious medical condition, called virilism, where women take on characteristics of a man, including balding, more muscular development, deepening voice, change in the appearance of the genitals, loss of menstruation and acne.

Virilism is caused by a relative excess of male to female hormones. Disorders of hair growth are part of the specialty of dermatology and should be initially evaluated by a dermatologist. If an underlying hormonal disorder is suspected, patients are referred to an endocrinologist.

If the onset of hirsutism is rapid, a hormone-secreting tumor should be suspected.

Most women with hirsutism do not have any serious medical condition, but rather develop excessive hair through a genetic predisposition.

Many women of Middle Eastern, Russian, Eastern and Southern European and African descent develop hirsutism.

Most of these women suffer in silence or go to great, and often painful, lengths to deal with it. Some spend hours a week using harsh chemicals, shaving or undergoing painful electrolysis, which takes many treatments and can cause scarring.

Modern technology has given us a simple, effective,



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permanent way for women to eliminate this hair with little discomfort.

Dermatologic laser surgeons can treat excessive hair growth anywhere on the body by using a laser to selectively injure the hair bulb, eliminating future hair production.

A mustache can be treated in just 10 to 20 seconds. The full face takes about five minutes. Treatment is minimally painful, with virtually no side effects. With just six treatments we can achieve more than 90

percent permanent hair elimination.

Currently we can treat any pigmented (colored) hair. Gray and blond hair does not respond well to laser treatments, though future technology promises to be effective even on these lighter-colored hairs.

Especially exciting is the development of a laser that can be used on dark-skinned women. Formerly, only light-skinned people could be treated for hirsutism.

This has been particularly exciting for women of African-American descent because, due to the coarse and curly quality of their hair, they often suffer from razor bumps, where the hair curls back into the hair follicle, creating unsightly and uncomfortable bumps on their skin. Often these ingrown hairs develop an inflammatory condition, called pseudo folliculitis barbae, which may advance to developing keloids — elevated, large scars common to African Americans.

Hirsutism may develop at any age, from puberty on. It is an easily and safely treated condition with laser surgery. Some of the most rewarding moments in my career come when I can tell a woman with great confidence that I can treat this condition and permanently eliminate her excessive hair.

Dr. Matthew R. Kelleher is a dermatologic laser surgeon and the director of The Advanced Cosmetic Laser and Surgery Center in Joliet, Morris and Naperville.