

How Not to Get Rid of Unwanted Hair

In some of the Scandinavian countries, the irradiation method of hair removal is still practiced. The affected area is bombarded with ionizing radiation (you know, the same sort of emissions given off by radium). After a period, there is no more embarrassing hair problem.

Everyone who hasn't been hiding under a rock since 1945 knows that there are serious and often fatal short- and long-term consequences of exposure to radiation. Most of us would not think of using radiation to remove unwanted hair. Whatever could those (usually sensible) Scandinavians be thinking?

In 1990, two surgeons from The Netherlands published a paper in the medical journal *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery*, describing the results in 40 patients of facial hair removal by surgical means. Incisions were made and hair roots were scraped off with a scalpel from underneath. The scars and lumpy skin left by this procedure were clearly visible in the photos which accompanied the article. Their faces looked horrible.

If some "permanent" hair removal techniques are dangerous or disfiguring, others simply don't work. Throughout the twentieth century, various "needleless electrolysis" systems have been hawked by the unscrupulous to the impressionable. This will probably continue for as long as people continue to be gullible — that is, forever.

Needleless techniques generally come with tweezers which are used to grasp the hair. Radio waves or other mysterious electrical signals are supposed to travel down the hair shaft to the root and kill it. The problem is that the hair does not conduct the electricity to the root.

Needleless electrolysis has been marketed under a variety of names, in salons and in kits for the home. Many people swear by it, but the FDA is not fooled, and will not let companies claim the technique causes permanent hair loss; slick ads nevertheless imply that it does.

Laser and "softlight" (an intense, but non-laser light source) can certainly vaporize hair, but there's a problem: this light must selectively reach and zap the hair root, and so far, no one has figured out a way to do it. Thermolase, Inc. reportedly smears carbon powder (which is much like powdered charcoal or photocopier toner)

on the skin in hopes that the powder will reach the hair root. However, by all accounts, the hair root is tightly sheathed, so the powder cannot reach it.

Lasers selectively heat dark objects, so especially for individuals with light skin and dark hair, there is potential for permanent hair removal by laser. As of this writing, it remains just that: a possibility. Hair loss by existing laser techniques is likely to be temporary, and the number of unskilled and under-trained practitioners (many of whom are physicians) make it a dangerous gamble.

Plucking and waxing remove hair by pulling out the roots. The hair then grows back, often with distorted roots which make later treatment by electrolysis very difficult. There is *anecdotal* evidence that after repeated plucking hairs grow in finer and lighter. No one has conclusively demonstrated this, and electrologists warn against it. It does stand to reason that repeated trauma to the hair root would eventually weaken it. Persons on low or fixed incomes should consider waxing or plucking over methods, like needleless systems, which are *proven* to be effective. We don't recommend waiting in hopes that someone will come up with a safe and inexpensive method of permanent hair removal.

A problem with electrolysis is that many operators just don't seem to have the skill to permanently kill hair. Some transwomen have spent tens of thousands of dollars on electrolysis, yet can still grow a full beard. The problem is not with the method, but with the practitioner. Some electrologists are very effective, as can be attested to by the many transsexual women who have thrown away their razors. It behooves the individual who is serious about transition to locate and patronize an *effective* electrologist — preferably, one who has treated and finished a number of transwomen.

One day, no doubt, some ingenious soul will figure out a safe, fast, painless, and inexpensive method of permanent hair removal. When that happens, those who have had electrolysis will of course be miffed because newcomers will not have to go through the same pain and expense they did. But until that day, it is only those who have had electrolysis who have thrown away their razors.

Some Precautions

Electrolysis

Be sure the electrologist uses presterilized, disposable probes and wears new disposable latex gloves. Use a reputable practitioner, since bad technique can result in hair regrowth or scarring. Currently, 31 states license electrologists. The International Guild of Electrologists, Inc. (800-830-3247) can provide referrals. Avoid home-electrolysis devices: their improper use can cause burning, infections, or scarring.

Laser

Choose a practitioner who is either a doctor, a registered nurse, or a medical technician working under a physician's supervision, because lasers can burn or scar when used incorrectly. Eye protection is also essential. Other cautions: "If you've had a recent chemical peel or have taken the acne drug Accutane, wait several months," says Jeffrey J. Colton, M.D., a facial plastic and cosmetic surgeon in Bingham Farms, MI. Also, avoid Retin-A or alpha-hydroxy acids for a few weeks before the procedure. Finally, be aware that some laser techniques can lighten dark skin. "Ask about this," advises Colton. And make sure the system being used is FDA approved *for hair removal*— not all are.

Adapted from "The Curse of Unwanted Hair" by Stacey Colino, *McCall's*, August, 1997