Smooth Moves

Yikes! Is that peach fuzz growing on your arms, legs and goodness knows where else? If so, here are a few of the most popular ways for women—and men—to remove unwanted hair.

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Maybe it's one of Mother Nature's ironic jokes: Why is it that we don't have enough hair where we want it—on top of our heads—but there's dark, fuzzy strands crawling up our arms, down our bellies, above our lips and basically on every surface we'd prefer be smooth and hairless. What's a girl to do?

From depilatories to tweezers to pads, here's a look at the five most common ways to defuzz and keep skin healthy and glowing, no matter the method used.

Defuzzing, a.k.a. hair removal processes, fall into several categories, but all differ in terms of time commitment, cost and level of pain endured. These categories are listed in order of easiest to most complicated. They include shaving, depilation (using chemicals), smoothing (using hair removal pads), waxing and zapping (using electrolysis and lasers).

All the procedures are safe and effective at removing hair, according to Victoria Barbosa, MD, assistant professor of dermatology at Rush University Medical Center and owner of Millennium Park Dermatology in Chicago. But there are a few drawbacks for each process, she warns.

Razors—the most common, simple and cheap form of defuzzing—shear away hairs at the skin's surface. The downside? Because the root of the hair follicle remains intact, hair can quickly regrow, usually within one to five days. Plus, there's also the problem of razor bumps, which can result when coarse, curly hair regrows and sharp-edged, angular hair strand tips curl down and pierce the skin's surface.

To overcome this problem, Barbosa suggests using shaving cream to soften hair and lubricate the skin so the razor can glide smoothly and evenly over the area. This allows for more blunt-cut hairs, decreased friction and less skin irritation, which all lower the possibility of getting unsightly and uncomfortable razor bumps.

What's the upside? To reiterate: Razors are an inexpensive and reliable way to remove hair.

Another common method of hair removal is waxing. This popular form involves applying a warm

resin to the skin and covering the area with a cloth strip. As the wax cools, it traps hair underneath. When the strip is pulled away from the skin, it yanks both the wax and hair.

“This removes hair from the root so hairs take much longer to regrow, usually several weeks,” Barbosa says. “The downside is that it can be uncomfortable. But many women get used to it over time.”

And, while you stroll down the beauty aisle of your local pharmacy for an at-home waxing kit, you will most likely find two other defuzzing options: chemical depilatories and hair removal pads. Chemical depilatories or creams work by breaking the disulfide bonds found in hair protein (keratin) and weakening strands so that hairs may be easily wiped from the skin’s surface. Hair removal pads are coated with small, rough crystals that scrape away hairs when moved in a constant circular motion across the skin. “But regrowth also occurs within a few days,” Barbosa cautions about both depilatories and pads. “And people should be aware that this method is time-consuming for large areas of the body, such as the legs.”

For African Americans, depilatories and removal pads require specific considerations. Black hair is often coarser and thicker, so chemical depilatories targeted to this population usually contain stronger chemicals. What’s more, constant use of removal pads on this type of hair may irritate the skin over time.

But other options exist, including permanent removal. For electrolysis, a probe is inserted into the hair follicle and an electric current is passed down through the strand to permanently destroy the hair root. Similarly, in laser hair removal—specifically, in a process called photothermolysis—a light beam destroys the follicle.

“Electrolysis and laser hair removal ultimately yield the longest-lasting results because they prevent future hair regrowth,” Barbosa says. But it usually takes several treatments to remove the thousands of hair follicles present at each site.

In general, regardless of the defuzzing method employed, black skin requires special handling. Make sure to do a spot test before applying any product to large areas of the skin, Barbosa cautions. And if choosing laser hair removal, make sure the office you go to is equipped to treat dark skin. Also, avoid irritating products such as exfoliating scrubs or acne meds. But do apply moisturizers to soothe skin before and after any treatments.

What’s the safest way to defuzz? There isn’t one, Barbosa says. “All of the methods are safe if correctly done, but electrolysis, waxing and laser hair removal must be performed by skilled practitioners.”

Here’s to a fuzz-free summer!

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