

Hirsutism (Excess Hair)

What is hirsutism?

Hirsutism is a condition in which too much hair grows on the face or body. Although hirsutism can occur in both men and women, it is usually only a problem for women.

Women with hirsutism have dark, thick hair on their face, chest, abdomen and back. This thick, dark hair is different from the hair that some women have on their upper lip, chin, breasts or stomach, or the fine "baby" hair all over their body. Women from certain ethnic groups tend to have more body hair than others. This does not mean that they have hirsutism.

What causes hirsutism?

Hirsutism can be caused by hair follicles that are overly sensitive to male hormones (called androgens), or it can be caused by abnormally high levels of these hormones. A very high level of male hormones may be caused by tumors. Tumors are formed when abnormal cells in the body grow out of control and clump together.

Some medicines can cause hirsutism. These medicines include birth control pills, hormones and anabolic steroids.

Hirsutism seems to run in families. If you have hirsutism, your family doctor may want to do some tests to find out what is causing it.

When should I see my doctor about hirsutism?

See your doctor if you have a sudden increase in facial or body hair. Also, if your periods have become irregular or if your voice has become deeper, you should see your doctor.

What can I do to get rid of the excess hair?

If you're overweight, lose weight. Losing weight reduces the amount of hormones in your body that cause increased hair growth. Other ways to eliminate or hide excess facial and body hair include the following:

Shaving is the safest and easiest method of removing hair. However, you will have stubble unless you shave every day. Your skin may become irritated with frequent shaving. If your skin becomes irritated, apply a small amount of 1% hydrocortisone cream.

Depilatories, or creams that remove hair, can be used. They leave no stubble. However, these creams may irritate your skin. To test how sensitive your skin is, apply a small amount of cream to the inside of your wrist. Wait for one day before applying the cream to other parts of your body. If you don't have a bad reaction to the cream on your wrist, it's probably okay to use it.

Bleaching paste may also be used. Apply the paste to your skin and let it remain for about 10 minutes. Then remove according to the directions on the label. Bleaching products may irritate your skin.

Plucking and waxing can cause skin irritation and make the hair grow faster by increasing the blood supply to the follicle. These methods aren't recommended.

Electrolysis gets rid of hair permanently by delivering a small electrical current through a needle placed into the hair follicle. Electrolysis is expensive and time-consuming. If you choose to have electrolysis, make sure the operator is qualified and licensed. Home electrolysis products and electronic tweezers don't work well and are not recommended.

Laser hair removal uses a laser light to damage hair follicles so unwanted hair falls out. This also prevents the hair from growing back. You'll probably need multiple laser treatments over a number of weeks, and the results may not be permanent. Laser hair removal is very expensive and can only be done by a licensed practitioner. Side effects of the procedure may include redness, darkening or lightening of the skin, and scarring.

Are there medicines to treat hirsutism?

Yes, your doctor may prescribe a medicine called an anti-androgen to help control the male hormones that cause hirsutism. Anti-androgens usually take at least 3 to 6 months to work. They can decrease the amount of new hair growth, but they are less likely to change the amount of hair you already have.

There is also a medicine made specifically to slow down the growth of facial hair. It is a cream that you apply to the affected skin on your face and chin. This medicine can start to work as soon as 4 to 8 weeks after you begin treatment, but it may take longer in some cases.