Curious about hair removal methods

Dear Alice,

What exactly does a depilatory cream or spray do? How does it work? Does hair grow back thicker and faster than before, like with shaving? For that matter, if you trim hair with a pair of scissors, does that also make it grow back thicker and faster? How about plucking with tweezers?

? Hairy and Curious

Answer

Dear Hairy and Curious,

Separating fact from fiction about hair removal, growth, and re-growth can be tricky. Your question provides a great opportunity to get to the root of some of the most common hair removal concerns. So it's time to review the pros and cons of these methods to help inform what might meet your hair removal needs.

Depilatories contain ingredients that chemically disintegrate the hair, which can then be wiped or scrubbed away from the follicle after a few minutes of exposure. Hair re-growth begins in about two to five days. There are various types of depilatory products on the market?creams, gels, powders, and other types?yet all versions work in the same way.

- What some may like: These products provide painless hair removal that's pretty quick and can be done at home for a relatively inexpensive price.
- What some may not like: Depilatory products can have a strong smell or odor. Darker-haired users may see a bit of a ?shadow? left on the skin after use due to subsurface hair. Depilatory products may also cause skin irritation (tip: carefully read the label?some are meant for specific body parts, such as the face or pubic area). Many manufacturers recommend testing a small amount on a patch of skin before using liberally to test for any potential reactions.

Tweezing plucks hair from the root using tweezers. Hair often begins to re-grow in about one week.

- What some may like: This hair-removal technique may be preferred for relatively small areas such as the eyebrow, upper lip, or random stray hairs. Similar to depilatories, it can be done at home for a relatively inexpensive price.
What some may not like: It may be time consuming for large patches of skin and also painful, depending on a person’s pain sensitivity. Some people may also experience ingrown hairs \(^2\) or scarring post tweezing.

**Shaving** with a razor is a common method of hair removal. Contrary to popular belief, shaving hasn’t been scientifically shown to cause hair to regrow faster or thicker \(^3\). However, since the hair is cut at a blunt angle when shaving, hair that grows back after shaving may feel coarser. Some hair re-growth could also have the illusion of looking darker or thicker simply because the new hair contrasts with recently shaved, hair-free skin.

- **What some may like:** Shaving’s an effective hair removal option for large areas such as legs, arms, and areas on the face. Supplies for shaving can also be found in most drug stores and supermarkets and range in price from relatively inexpensive to more expensive.
- **What some may not like:** Some people may experience razor burn or ingrown hairs after shaving. Shaving hair when it’s wet, using a moisturizing shaving cream, changing the razor blade frequently (to avoid using a dull blade), and shaving in the direction of growth can all lessen irritation and razor burn.

**Trimming** or cutting hair with scissors doesn’t affect hair growth or thickness. As hair grows, it’s exposed to sun, blow-drying, curling, and other environmental and styling elements. Split ends might arise from the wear and tear, which may make the hair appear shorter and thinner.

- **What some may like:** A haircut, even if not actually increasing hair growth or thickness, can certainly make hair feel and look healthier ? even if it?s just a little trim!
- **What some people may not like:** Depending on the place, salons and barber shops vary widely in price. If on a budget, try looking into local beauty schools that have discounted cuts by students in-training.

**Waxing** involves the application of wax to the part of the body in which hair will be removed. The wax is then pulled off in a quick motion, which removes the hair under the wax. Hair re-growth can begin in about one week.

- **What some may like:** This method can work on various parts of the body, ranging in small areas such as the eyebrows to larger areas of the body such as the legs or bikini area. This method can be done at home inexpensively, or it can be done professionally in a salon.
- **What some people may not like:** Depending on the person, it may be painful or cause irritation. If wax is too hot, it may also cause minor burns.

If these methods above aren’t cutting it, there are other options to explore such as laser hair removal \(^4\), electrolysis, and prescription pills and creams. The only permanent solution is electrolysis, where an electrical current destroys hair follicles, usually over the course of multiple treatments. Laser hair removal also tends to require multiple sessions to work, but take note that it may just slow hair growth rate and not completely get rid of it. Pills and creams are another temporary fix - hair eventually grows back once treatment is stopped. If you’re considering one of these options, a health care provider can help you determine what’s most appropriate for you and provide more information.

Each person’s skin and hair follicle sensitivity is different. Hair grooming techniques that work for a friend may not work as effectively for you. So, if you’re trying to decide between options,
you may want to try a few out and evaluate your own results for your grooming goals.

Rooting for you,

Alice!

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