

Side effects of laser hair removal ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I am 21 years old, and I'm thinking of getting laser hair removal, but I'm scared of the side effects. Can you tell me if it's safe to get it or if the side effects are really bad? I am very confused.

Thanks.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Laser hair removal performed by a licensed practitioner with an approved laser is safe and has a low risk of lasting side effects. States regulate who can use therapeutic laser devices, and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approves lasers for specific uses. You might want to make sure your treatment provider is licensed and that they use a FDA-approved device.

Laser hair removal works by sending a low-energy beam into the skin. The beam is absorbed by darker-pigmented areas, such as hair follicles. The laser energy is converted to heat, destroying the hair root so it no longer grows. The treatment works best on people with lighter skin and darker hair. More recently, longer-wavelength lasers that work better on darker skin have been developed. At least three treatments are usually required to remove *most* of the hair in the treated area, and more may be needed for darker skin.

According to the FDA, laser treatments cannot claim to be painless. For most people, the laser treatment produces an irritating or painful feeling similar to the snap of a rubber band against the skin or a series of pricks with a warm needle. Laser hair removal for people with darker skin may be more difficult and more painful. The treated area will probably swell, turn red, or become slightly discolored for one to three days. With proper treatment, blistering shouldn't occur. Permanent scarring or discoloration is rare. For people with herpes, laser treatment can trigger an outbreak, so an antiviral medication may be given beforehand. Also, if you have a history of abnormal scarring, you may want to mention it to the practitioner.

The common short-term side effects (swelling and redness) are a result of the laser's heat. Lasers are equipped with skin-cooling devices, but if you find that your skin is especially

sensitive, an anesthetic cream can be applied before treatment. A cool-pack can also be used after treatments to reduce pain. The practitioner should conduct a test on a small area to see how your skin reacts to treatment 48 hours before beginning a full treatment.

Long-term, negative side effects of laser hair removal are rare. If you're still wary, you might want to speak with a health care provider about your specific circumstances and try a small area first to see how your skin reacts.

Alice!

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