

# Hirsutism (Excess Hair)

## *Patient Fact Sheet*

### **What is Hirsutism?**

Hirsutism is the medical term for excess body or facial hair in adult women.

Women with hirsutism may have dark, thick hair on their face, chest, abdomen and back. This thick, dark hair is different from the fine 'baby' hair found all over the body.

Women from certain ethnic groups tend to have more body hair than others and it may be quite normal to have some hair on their upper lip, chin, breasts or stomach. This does not necessarily mean that you have hirsutism.

### **Why is hirsutism an important issue?**

In our society, too much facial or body hair is considered abnormal. Excess hair growth can cause great psychological distress or social embarrassment. It is often a treatable problem, but many women do not realise that treatments are available.

### **What causes hirsutism?**

In the majority of cases there will be no medical problem causing hirsutism. It may be that hirsutism runs in the family or there is an inherited extra sensitivity of the skin to a group of hormones called androgens. These are often thought of as 'male hormones' but they are produced by both men and women, only men usually produce a greater amount than women. Testosterone is an androgen many people have heard of, but there are several other androgens too. In a minority of women with hirsutism there may be an increased production of androgens.

### **Who is most affected?**

Hirsutism usually begins after puberty, but hirsutism can start at any age. Most women gradually develop more facial or body hair with age. Because it is not considered a suitable topic of conversation, many affected women do not realise how common a problem it is. At least 25% of normal middle-aged women remove unwanted facial hair. As women come to the time of the menopause it can be quite normal to develop a gradual increase in facial hair and a loss of body hair.

### **Is it my hormones?**

In some cases there may be abnormally high levels of androgens which may be due to an underlying medical condition or hormonal imbalance.

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

Rarely, hirsutism is a result of a serious underlying medical disorder, Your doctor will be able to detect this with a medical history and some simple blood tests.

**Who should see a doctor?**

It is important to see your doctor if you have a sudden increase in facial or body hair or any of the features mentioned below. These might concern doctors about underlying medical problems.

- The hirsutism is severe.
- The hirsutism developed over a short time (over 1-2 years).
- If it is accompanied by menstrual problems.
- If there are other features to suggest a marked increase in androgens such as hair thinning, baldness or deepening of the voice.
- If accompanied by obesity or diabetes.

Women with mild hirsutism and regular menstrual cycles rarely have an underlying medical problem.

**Can hirsutism be treated?**

Yes. The treatment of hirsutism can be divided into mechanical treatments, which physically remove unwanted hair, and medical treatments, which reduce the effect of androgens on the skin.

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

**Shaving** is a safe and easy method of removing hair. Some people think shaving encourages more hair growth, this is not true but the stubble from re-growth is undesirable. Your skin may become irritated with frequent shaving.

**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** creams may also be used to lighten the hair and make it less obvious. They are often used for facial hair but can be used on the body too. Bleaching products may irritate your skin and may not be suitable for darker skin tones.

**Plucking and waxing** is an effective method for some but it can cause irritation. Occasionally scarring can occur if skin is damaged in the waxing process. It should be used with caution on the face.

**Electrolysis** aims to get 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 experienced. 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. It works best with dark hair on light skin although some new lasers have improved results on darker skin. Laser hair removal is very expensive and can only be done at a special clinic. 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 (anti-androgen) to help control the androgens that cause hirsutism.

Anti-androgens usually take at least 4 to 6 months to work. They can slow hair growth, and make the hairs thinner and less noticeable. The medicine should be continued for several years.

\* An important side effect of these drugs is that they could harm your male baby if you became pregnant whilst taking the tablets. It is vital to take these drugs with a form of contraception

#### **Oral contraceptive**

Although several low dose combined pills may be helpful there are some specifically formulated to have anti-androgenic activity.

Side effects include spotting (bleeding between periods), tender breasts, nausea and headaches, especially in the first few months.

The oral contraceptive pill is not suitable for everyone.

#### **Cyproterone**

This is a commonly used anti androgen. A combined formula with the oral contraceptive pill can be effective for most women with hirsutism. Larger doses of cyproterone i.e. 50 - 200 mg for 10 days each cycle can be used for more severe cases. Side effects include weight gain, depression and loss of libido.

#### **Spiroinolactone**

This is more commonly used in the USA. It works as an anti-androgen but is also a water tablet (diuretic). Spiroinolactone 50 – 200 mg daily can slowly reduce excessive hair growth. Side effects include tender breasts and irregular menstrual bleeding.

3rd generation progestins

Yasmin

**Are there any  
'natural'  
treatments?**

*Saw Palmetto  
16/12/16*

Losing weight reduces the amount of hormones in your body that cause increased hair growth. This can slow hair growth.

Saw Palmetto is a herbal plant extract with anti androgen activity but there is little scientific knowledge about how this works compared with more established drugs. The same contraceptive precautions need to be taken if taking this drug.

## **Summary**

■ **Excess body or facial hair in adult women is called hirsutism**

■ **Women from different ethnic backgrounds have different hair growth patterns and it can be quite normal to have some hair on the face, nipples or stomach. It doesn't mean that you have hirsutism.**

■ **Most women with hirsutism do not have a serious medical condition or hormone imbalance causing the hirsutism.**

■ **Very rarely there may be a medical problem associated with the hirsutism. Your doctor should be able to detect these with a medical history and blood tests.**

■ **It is important to contact a doctor if hirsutism develops over a short time or if you have changes your menstrual periods.**

■ **There are a range of physical methods to remove hair including shaving, waxing, electrolysis and laser hair removal.**

■ **Medications are available to reduce the effect of androgens on hair which can reduce hair growth in some women**

■ **Hirsutism can be an embarrassing and distressing condition. Your doctor may help make an assessment of the hirsutism and work together with you to discuss possible treatment options available.**