

Patient Information for Hirsutism

Overview

Hirsutism describes excessive hair growth in females caused by androgen hormones (male hormones) in the body as well as other masculine changes. Hirsutism is a common condition and is different from hypertrichosis, or excessive hairiness. Hirsutism is a "male" hair growth pattern found in such places as the chest, chin, upper lip, and stomach. Other such changes might include deepening of the voice, acne, and increased muscle growth. There are family and ethnic factors that affect hair growth, but hirsutism is usually caused by a disease or the use of certain medications.

Since there are a number of causes of hirsutism, you should see a doctor for medical care to determine the underlying cause and appropriate treatment.

Who's At Risk

Women in their 20s and 30s are typically at risk for this male pattern excess hair growth. Women may also have female relatives with the same condition.

Signs & Symptoms

Look for excessive hair growth in areas such as the sideburns, upper lip, chin, chest, stomach, and groin. Deepening voice, acne, reduction in breast size, increased sex drive, and increased muscle growth are other signs.

There are many other symptoms that can be found with hirsutism, including sudden weight gain, irregular menstrual periods, and an inability to become pregnant.

You may also have high blood pressure, easy bruising, muscle weakness, and purple-colored stretch marks on the stomach.

Self-Care Guidelines

You can remove the unsightly hair on your own using tweezers, by shaving, or with hair removal creams; however, the hair might return, and removing large amounts of unwanted hair with these techniques may be frustrating.

When to Seek Medical Care

Hirsutism is mainly a cosmetic problem but can also mean something is going on within the body. Your doctor can determine if the excessive hair is normal or because of an underlying disease, such as polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), Cushing syndrome, or congenital adrenal hyperplasia.

Your doctor may run tests to check testosterone levels and other androgens, such as androstenedione and dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA), found in the blood that might be

increased in hirsutism. Your doctor may refer you to a specialist.

Treatments Your Physician May Prescribe

If your doctor suspects an underlying cause, you will likely need to see a specialist for treatment.

If no underlying problem is determined, your doctor may prescribe oral medications to block the action of androgens such as an oral contraceptive or spironolactone (not FDA approved for treating hirsutism).

Hair removal may be achieved by different methods.

Remove the hair mechanically:

- Depilatory (removing hair from the surface of the skin) – Includes shaving and chemical treatments. Contrary to popular belief, shaving hair does not make it grow back thicker or grow in faster.
- Epilatory (removing hair along with the root) – Includes tweezing, waxing, laser therapy, and electrolysis. Electrolysis can help with mild hirsutism for permanent hair removal, especially if performed by an experienced electrologist. Laser therapy is another option for permanent hair removal for moderate to severe hirsutism but may be expensive and time consuming.

The topical cream eflornithine (known as Vaniqa) is a medication prescribed by your doctor to prevent additional facial hair.