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## Banishing body hair: Are lasers the answer?

By Lisa Skolnik

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**W**arm weather is on the way, and with it comes revealing attire and the need to remove body hair. But before you start shaving, waxing, using depilatories or choosing electrolysis, consider the newest weapon in the war on unwanted hair.

"Lasers may be the most effective form of long-term hair removal," says Dr. Tina Alster, a dermatologist on the faculty of Harvard Medical School, founder of the Washington Institute of Dermatologic Laser Surgery and author of "The Essential Guide to Cosmetic Laser Surgery" (Alliance, \$16). "[They appear] to stunt the hair follicles and force them into a prolonged resting phase.

"It's also an easy, quick and almost totally painless process," she continues, which can be done in a doctor's office or at a spa. And "it's particularly effective for areas where other treatments are cumbersome or can cause skin reactions," such as the chin, upper lip, breasts and back.

If used correctly, lasers "are safe, don't cause cancer or scarring and can cover large areas [such as backs or legs] very rapidly," says Dr. Christopher Nanni, a dermatologist conducting studies on the process at Alster's institute. Depending on which laser system is used, removing all hair from an upper lip or an underarm takes about 10 minutes, and a back or leg could take 45 minutes. The process "feels like little snaps or crackles against the skin," says Alster.

However, it is costly. The cost per treatment is about \$300 to \$600 per body part (an upper lip may be \$400, a lower leg \$600). Packages that include several treatments, which are often necessary, can cost \$2,000.

Why so much? "Laser machines are very expensive," says Dr. Jerome Garden, a Chicago dermatologist on staff at Northwestern University Medical School, who specializes in laser therapy and research, "often costing more than \$100,000."

And just how prolonged the dormant phase

hair follicles experience after laser treatment is unknown. "It's entirely possible that with multiple treatments, there will be a permanent reduction of hair regrowth, but it's still too new to know," says Nanni. Studies have been promising, but inconclusive.

The first laser hair removal system, SoftLight from ThermoLase, received clearance for use from the FDA in April of 1995 and three more received FDA clearance only last month. They are EpiLaser by Palomar Medical Products, EpiTouch TM by Sharplan Lasers and CHROMOS 694 by MEHL/Biophile International.

The cost of laser treatments should come down as more systems enter the marketplace. But there are other considerations.

SoftLight is a Neodymium Yag laser. Though gentle, the laser light is easily absorbed by dark pigments, so SoftLight's system involves waxing the skin to remove the hair and open the follicles, massaging a carbon-based lotion into the skin, then wiping off the excess. When the laser is passed over the skin, it heats the carbon remaining in the hair follicles, damaging the follicle without harming the skin.

The three newest systems are all long-pulse ruby lasers, which operate on a similar principle since the light is attracted to the melanin in the hair. But they don't require waxing or a carbon-based lotion because the laser is stronger and thermally destroys the hair and growth cells. However, the skin also contains melanin, so ruby lasers are not always as effective on darker skin tones (which can burn) or very light blond hair (which may not have enough pigment to activate the process).

Some ruby lasers have built-in devices to address these problems, such as EpiLaser, which uses a patented system to cool the skin at the same time it delivers the laser energy (this destroys the hair follicle and protects the skin) or the CHROMOS 694 Laser, which will soon have a skin and hair color sensor.

For referrals on doctors qualified to use lasers, call the American Society for Dermatologic Surgery at 800-441-2737.

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