

SELF | JANUARY

SPECIAL REPORT

HOW WILL YOU LOOK AND FEEL IN 10 YEARS?

Lasers as Razors?

Experts assess the state of the art of hair removal. BY LYDIA PRESTON

A year ago, lasers used for hair removal were a novelty. No more: More than 1,000 have now been installed in doctors' offices and medically affiliated day spas, and industry sources say that number could easily double by the end of this year.

These lasers promise to eradicate body hair without the hassle of other meth-

ods. But their long-term effectiveness remains a question. Adds **Washington, DC, laser surgeon Christopher Nanni, M.D.**, "We have to do a lot of explaining to make sure patients' expectations are realistic."

According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, what's unrealistic is to expect any currently approved depilating laser

to do more than remove existing hair. "None can claim to induce permanent or even long-term hair loss," says FDA spokesperson Sharon Snider.

"How long hair removal lasts depends on the patient and the type of laser," explains Melanie Grossman, M.D., director of laser and clinical research for the Laser and Skin Surgery

The Needle Versus the Laser

Only one method of hair removal can claim permanence: electrolysis. It's a time-consuming and highly operator-dependent technique in which a fine needle delivers electric current directly to the base of each hair follicle. A skilled technician can typically treat the unwanted visible hairs—which represent only a small fraction of hair-producing follicles—on two square inches of skin in a 30-minute session. Depending on your hair-growth patterns, clearing a small area like the upper lip may take from eight to 24 sessions, spread out over a year or more; at \$30 to \$35 per session, the

cost is about the same as for the laser process.

Depilating lasers don't break the skin (so there's a minimal risk of scarring) and are considerably faster. An entire leg can be defuzzed in approximately an hour; an upper lip may take only minutes. They also require less skill to use, even though, legally, they are medical devices that must be operated under a physician's supervision. Women who have experienced both techniques say that laser hair removal is also less painful than electrolysis—or even waxing. The sensation is variously described as a prickling or tingling, a snapping or stinging, or "hot pinches." —L. P.



Center of New York. "Some people have about 40 percent less hair six months after just one session with the long-pulse ruby laser. But with other people, the hair returns in six months." According to studies, most people who have a series of treatments (typically two to four, though in some cases up to 12) come away with skin that stays virtually hairless for several months to a year. When hair grows back, it tends to be fine and sparse. How long it may take for hair to return to its original density and texture—or whether it will at all—no one knows.

For women willing to give laser hair removal a try, here are *Continued on page 44*

some key considerations.

- Know your lasers. The most widely available are SoftLight and a trio of ruby lasers (EpiLaser, EpiTouch and Chromos 694). The ruby lasers (along with the new EpiLight and PhotoGenica LPIR devices) target pigment in the hair and follicles. Most effective at eradicating dark brown or black hair, they can cause temporary light or dark patches, especially in naturally dark-toned skin. SoftLight targets the carbon particles in the activating solution that is massaged into the follicles and should work independently of hair or skin color.

- Ask about potential side effects. Lasers should not be used on broken, abraded, sunburned or tanned skin. Birth-control pills and other hormone-containing medicines can alter normal hair growth, and a wide variety of drugs can act as photosensitizers.

- Compare costs. SoftLight treatments at the company's Spa Thiras run from \$726 for small areas to \$1,333 for the thighs or lower legs. Physicians who lease SoftLight machines or use ruby lasers currently charge from \$100 to \$400 per session for smaller areas (many of which take one or two sessions) to several thousand dollars for large sites such as legs. ❖