

# Getting to the Root of Hair Removal

By Elaine Staats

There are only three things in life that are permanent - death, taxes and Electrolysis

What? We all know about the first two. What exactly is electrolysis? Is it really permanent? Because there's a lack of information—and an abundance of misinformation—about hair removal methods, we want to present you with the facts on electrolysis and other hair removal methods. Finding out how to get your body (and unwanted hair) ready for beach weather this summer can be a cumbersome task. Following is a simple guide to the wide variety of hair-free options to help you make an informed choice.

## Basics of Hair Growth

Basic knowledge of the mechanics of hair growth will help you understand the pros and cons of the various methods of hair removal. Each hair follicle is attached to a blood supply called the papilla, and it's blood that causes hair growth. This blood supply can be stimulated by hormonal activity, medications, or manipulating the hair by tweezing or waxing. This stimulation can cause an onset of, or increase in, hair growth. Each hair has an individual growing and shedding cycle, so not all of your hair can be present, treated, or removed at any

given time. Electrolysis will therefore take several treatments to be permanent. Lasers take repeated sessions to effectively reduce the amount of hair growth. When it comes to shaving or plucking, the hair will continue to grow back but those are the least costly alternatives.

## Electrolysis

In 1875 an ophthalmologist named Charles E. Michel reported removing ingrown eyelashes by inserting a needle charged with negative galvanic current into the follicle. Advancements and refinements have taken place since Dr. Michel's discovery, but the basic premise of electrolysis has remained unchanged for the past 129 years. A fine needle-like instrument is inserted into the follicle. Because the hair follicle is like a pocket in the skin, the skin remains unbroken and there is no bleeding.

After the needle is inserted small amount of current is applied to cauterize the papilla (blood supply). The current loosens the hair, which is then removed painlessly with tweezers. The hair is not forcibly tweezed; it simply slides out with no resistance. If electrolysis is performed properly, the only sensation patients



feel is the current, which can range from a mild sting to a hot pinch, and typically lasts only a few seconds.

At this time, Electrolysis is the only method cleared by the FDA for permanent hair removal. Although electrolysis is truly permanent, it's a process that takes several sessions to achieve permanency.

**Pros:** It is the only scientifically proven method of permanent hair removal. Virtually everyone is a candidate to receive treatments in terms of hair and skin type and color.

**Cons:** It can be an uncomfortable process to those who are more sensitive. It can be a time-consuming journey to achieve permanency. There may be slight temporary redness and irritation to the skin.

Electrologist's charge by the amount of time spent in treatment, not by the area, so larger areas, which require more time, can increase the cost.

### Shaving or Clipping

Shaving or clipping simply cuts the hair off at the surface level of the skin. As the hair grows back, the tip will be blunt, leaving the impression the hair is now thicker. This is just a perception, as cutting hair doesn't affect the root structure of the hair in any way. It's therefore not possible to strengthen hair through shaving or cutting, although my patients usually insist that it does. It's easy to get that impression. When our bodies present us with a new patch of hair, it is most commonly hormonally based. If the hair were left untouched, it would likely become stronger over time but most of us don't leave the hair alone long enough to see if that's true. We tackle the problem by shaving the hair off.

**Pros:** Unless you tend to cut yourself while shaving, it's not a harmful method of hair removal. Shaving or clipping hair is fast, relatively easy and inexpensive.

**Cons:** This method is temporary, lasting anywhere from a few hours to a few days. The stubble can be annoying. Rashes and razor burns can occur.

### Tweezing, Waxing and Threading

The mechanics of tweezing, waxing, and threading of hair are similar in that the hair is forced out of the follicle by the root. Tweezing removes hair one at a time. Waxing removes multiple hairs at a time and can be done using warm or cold wax. Cold wax is

available on strips that look like large pieces of tape. Warm wax is heated up and applied directly to the hair. In both cases, the wax is applied in the same direction as the growth, and is quickly removed by pulling the wax off in the opposite direction of growth. Threading utilizes a coiled string, which runs along the top of the skin pulling out all the hair it contacts. All methods involve some level of discomfort or pain, which will vary by patient and method used.

**Pros:** It's affordable and fast. With tweezing you can selectively remove only the hairs you want. Waxing and threading are relatively quick and treat large areas in a short time. These methods can be done professionally, or there are waxing kits for home use. Hair takes approximately 2 weeks before it begins growing back.

**Cons:** These methods are temporary. Some find an increase in ingrown hairs. Detaching the root from the papilla forcibly can cause an increased blood supply to the follicle, rendering stronger subsequent hair. (Remember that blood is what makes hair grow.) The skin can be red and irritated temporarily after the treatment. In sensitive skin, waxing can remove some skin along with the hair. If the wax is too hot, it can burn the skin.

### Depilatories

Depilatories are available in drug stores and are commonly found in a cream or spray form. When applied, a depilatory dissolves hair and is considered a chemical shave. It typically keeps the area hair-free for about five days. A word of note: hair is comprised of keratin, which is a protein; skin is also comprised of

keratin. The trick with a depilatory is to have it dissolve the hair before it begins to dissolve the skin. Patch testing the area to be treated should be done to avoid burning the skin.

**Pros:** They are quick and painless unless you are allergic to the product. They're inexpensive and can be done at home. The hair is initially soft as it first starts to grow back.

**Cons:** They're temporary. They're not suitable for sensitive skin or extremely coarse hair. It's possible to burn the skin with these products.

### Lasers

The use of lasers for hair removal has a fairly short history. Laser treatment has been cleared by the FDA as a permanent hair reduction method, not a permanent hair removal method. It may sound like semantics, but there's a big difference between the two classifications and you don't want to be misled about what 'permanent' actually means. In simple terms, laser hair removal treatment can only be considered "long-term" not "permanent." Laser treatment does provide beneficial results, but the consumer needs to realize its limitations.

The ideal candidate for laser treatment is a light-skinned person with dark hair. The laser needs the contrast in color between hair and skin in order to work. Most laser patients find their initial treatment renders the best results. The hair grows back finer and lighter, which makes subsequent treatments less effective. Darker and olive-skinned people risk having the pigment on their skin absorbed by the laser, causing a

# Hair Removal

condition known as hypopigmentation (permanent loss of skin color). Hyperpigmentation, a darkening of the skin in a blotchy freckle-like manner, may also occur with laser use. Newer machines are being developed to treat patients with lighter hair or darker skin. Regarding treatment professionals, a laser practitioner in California must be at minimum a registered nurse, practicing under the supervision of a physician.

**Pros:** Lasers can treat large areas of growth in a relatively short period of time. Re-growth is much slower than other methods of temporary hair removal. It may take up to several months for the hair to reemerge.

**Cons:** Laser hair removal is considered temporary. Laser treatment cannot be effectively used on all skin and hair types. Some studies suggest that laser hair removal treatment can damage collagen fibers, accelerating the aging process. Laser treatment can be costly. Laser is generally the most costly alternative, primarily because it can only be performed by the medical community.

## Bleaching

Bleaching deserves an honorable mention. Although it doesn't involve removing hair, lightening the color of the hair can sometimes be enough to achieve the desired result. Bleaching is a good alternative for young girls with facial hair that's getting darker, who are not ready to tackle any of the aforementioned methods of hair removal. Facial hair

bleach is available in drug stores, and can be done in the privacy of your own home.

## Words of Advice

Sun exposure should be limited for 24 to 48 hours after using any method of hair removal. It's particularly important to wear sunscreen after any of these treatments. Skin is especially prone to the ill effects of the sun after electrolysis, laser or waxing. Unprotected skin is more likely to develop hyper pigmentation (freckle like spots). With so many alternatives for hair removal, it's just a matter of evaluating the options and deciding

which is right for you. Summer is right around the corner, and it's best to get an early start on choosing the most appropriate method for your individual case. Hair does grow faster in warmer weather, and we have more body parts showing that needs attention. Don't let excess hair prevent you from enjoying the season.

*Elaine Staats is a licensed Electrologist and licensed Esthetician and has been in practice for 17 years. She owns and operates Image Enrichment Group located at 10301 So. De Anza Blvd, Suite 2 in Cupertino. For information on Electrolysis, skin care, or Microdermabrasion, please contact her at 408-996-8969 or [www.ieg.net](http://www.ieg.net)*