

Social pressures and health consequences associated with body hair removal.

Body depilation—defined as the reduction or removal of body hair from the neck down—is not a new phenomenon. The practice of depilation for artistic, medical and cultural reasons has fluctuated throughout the ages and across civilisations (Ramsey et al, 2009). However, recent years have seen a marked increase in body hair removal among both women and men (reference), with a greater and younger proportion of the Western population going to multiple, extraordinary and sometimes painful lengths to remove body hair in pursuit of a hairless, heavily groomed body. This article explores hair removal practices among women and the health consequences associated with depilation. It also discusses the social meaning of hair removal from different body parts, and reflects on the source and impact of pressures on women to be hairless, with particular consideration of how this makes women feel about their bodies.

Hair growth and removal

During puberty, the growth of underarm and pubic hair is a well-recognised secondary sexual characteristic. As the body matures, hair on the legs, arms and other parts of the body can lengthen, thicken and darken to varying degrees. Although body hair is physiologically natural and an indicator of sexual maturity, visible body hair, certainly for Western women, is regarded as unacceptable. Its removal, particularly of dark or long hair, is virtually compulsory. Leg and underarm hair removal is particularly ubiquitous among Western women; it is a relatively long-standing unquestioned cultural norm considered to be a natural part of good grooming. More than 90% of women in UK, Australian and US surveys reported regular depilation, typically by shaving, waxing, or using hair removal creams (Terry and Braun, 2013).

Pubic hair becomes a problem for women when it ‘enters the public domain’ (e.g. from the sides of a bikini) (Braun et al, 2013), and shaving and trimming of the bikini line tends to be dictated by choice of swimwear, underwear and sportswear. As these have become more revealing, removal rates of bikini-line hair are high: between 50 and 100% of women surveyed reported removing bikini-line hair (Terry and Braun, 2013).

Norms around the removal of pubic hair within the bikini line are less concrete; however, evidence suggests a rapid increase in full pubic hair removal since the 1980s

The percentage of women removing most or all of their pubic hair varies between studies and depends on the age of those investigated. Some 32–64% of women remove most or all of their pubic hair, typically by shaving and waxing, or using electrolysis or lasers, with younger women more likely to remove their pubic hair. Herbenick et al (2010) found that 58% of women aged 18–24 years, compared to 11% of women aged over 50 years, practise pubic depilation. Moreover, health professionals have reported that it is unusual to examine women under the age of 30 years who have all their pubic hair

There is comparatively little research investigating pubic hair removal practices among younger adolescents, with the exception of anecdotal evidence and concerned reports from medical practitioners (including those called on to manage associated health problems), who have seen increasing

numbers of girls aged 11 and 12 years removing their pubic hair soon after they begin to develop it (Trager, 2006). This is an observation that Terry and Braun (2013: 604) suggest 'reflects the lack of room women have to question or understand these (hair removal) norms before they must begin practising them'.

Health consequences

As well as being costly, body hair removal is associated with several risks that are rarely discussed or disseminated in public health arenas. Electrolysis and laser hair removal (procedures often considered low risk) can cause irritation, scarring and pigmentary changes. The use of razors is associated with burns, nicks and cuts, ingrown hairs, infections such as methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), and contact dermatitis (either from shaving or aftershave products). Moreover, both shaving and waxing can cause trauma to the hair follicle and increase the risk of both folliculitis (infection of the hair follicle) and the development of extremely painful follicular pustules that require antibiotic therapy. The desire for hairlessness is reflected in the observation that women with folliculitis will often continue to shave and wax despite extreme irritation (Trager, 2006). Pubic hair acts as a physical protective barrier and its removal increases the risk of contracting or transmitting sexually transmitted bacterial and viral infections, including herpes simplex and the human papilloma virus (Desruelles et al, 2013). Shaving and waxing the genital area can also cause inflammation of the vulva, lead to local skin irritation, and increase the risk of impetigo.

Health professionals have reported that sexually active adolescents are often shocked that they have been 'auto-inoculating sexually transmitted infections such as *Molluscum contagiosum* and *Condyloma acuminata* by shaving' their pubic area (Trager, 2006: 117). Sharp pubic hair stubble can also cause irritation for sexual partners. In addition, social analysts have hypothesised that pubic hair removal is a contributory factor in the recent rise in demand for genital cosmetic surgery—a procedure that has considerable associated health risks. Pubic hair removal, which results in the vulva becoming more visible, may increase women's dissatisfaction with their vulval appearance by facilitating negative evaluations of their genitalia 'in a way not otherwise possible when hair is present' (DeMaria and Berenson, 2013: 230).

Appearance as a motivator

The primary motivator behind the pursuit of a hairless, heavily groomed body is widely thought to be appearance-related. As well as little or no body fat, narrow hips, a large bust and long legs, contemporary Western society's construction of a desirable female body includes having sleek, smooth and hairless skin. Hairlessness functions to contrast the feminine with the masculine; to be hairy is perceived to be masculine, whereas femininity is associated with a prepubescent youthfulness that is reflected in the absence of body hair (Toerien et al, 2005). The impossibility of most women achieving this ideal leaves many girls and women perpetually dissatisfied with their bodies, leading them to engage in multiple time-consuming, costly and potentially harmful beauty regimens to modify their appearance. Thus, just as women tirelessly pursue the unnaturally thin ideal through dieting, monitoring

and surveillance, they pluck, shave and wax to control the constant growth of body hair and bring their bodies closer to society's ideal of what is attractive (Tiggemann and Hodgson, 2008).

The strength of appearance-related motives to depilate visible leg, bikini-line and underarm hair are reflected in findings from both qualitative and quantitative studies, often alongside evidence of the powerful social pressures women experience to conform to the hairless body ideal. Body hair on women has become an elicitor of shame and self-consciousness; those who choose not to depilate are typically subject to ridicule and abuse by comments that question their femininity, sexuality, hygiene and morality, and assume aggressiveness, animalistic traits, poor education, or mental health issues (Terry and Braun, 2013). This form of 'social policing' (Terry and Braun, 2013) is often executed by significant others and loved ones. In a US study by Fahs and Delgado (2011), female students who did not to remove their body hair for 12 weeks regularly received comments from mothers, sisters and partners, who let them know of the undesirability of their 'gross' hairy bodies and their 'betrayal of appropriate femininity and sexuality norms'.

In contrast to leg and underarm hair, pubic hair is not normally visible to the public; rather it is reserved for view by intimate partners and the self. Removal by waxing (the most common procedure) is also painful; although the practice is increasing, it is not yet a normative behaviour. The decision to remove pubic hair therefore requires a more conscious thought process.

The primary reason Western women give for pubic hair removal is again appearance-related: pubic hair is considered unattractive and disgusting. Tiggemann and Lewis (2004) reported a positive correlation between negative attitudes towards pubic hair and disgust sensitivity. In addition to appearance-based influences, women typically use rhetoric implying empowered choice when discussing their motivators for hair removal. However, in Islamic societies it is a religiously endorsed hygiene practice; they predominantly cite cleanliness, comfort, sexual desirability to potential or existing partners, and sexual liberation to perform particular sexual acts as reasons for depilation (de Maria and Berenson, 2013).

Sexual confidence

Although research, albeit limited, has identified that some women who remove their pubic hair can have a more positive genital self-image and greater sexual confidence (de Maria and Berenson, 2013), evidence that appearance and cleanliness concerns are the main reasons for pubic hair removal shows that women are as ashamed of their pubic hair as they are of other areas of body hair. However, women's perception that sexual partners find a hairless or virtually hairless vulva 'sexy' may be an assumption rather than a reality. Braun and Terry (2013) referenced youth sexuality research (Holland et al, 2004) that introduces the concept of women holding 'a male in the head', whose imagined preferences and desires are assumed and internalised by young women. Rather, evidence suggests that it is women's friends that are more likely to influence this practice and police these norms, rather than sexual partners who are the imagined audience for pubic hair removal. For example, Bercaw-Pratt et al (2012) report that it is the families and friends of adolescent girls who exert pressure to remove pubic hair, particularly when they are sexually active. Moreover, Terry and Braun (2013: 605) challenged

the 'assumption that males have narrow expectations about the degree of hair on the female pubic area' by reporting that many men find pubic hair desirable.

Enactment of culture

In contrast to those who regard pubic hair removal as a trivial and inconsequential behaviour that merely reflects a passing 'fashion', body image researchers and psychologists are more sceptical about this. Braun et al (2013) consider hair removal to be less of an 'unencumbered choice' for women and more of 'an enactment of culture'—the result of implicit pressures from social norms and gendered messages around attractiveness and femininity. Tiggemann and Hodgson (2008) and Toerien and Wilkinson (2004) are also concerned that pressures to remove what is a significant marker of adult female sexuality is a reflection of society's discomfort with the adult female body and veneration of the highly sexualised prepubescent body, which is arguably an example of cultural support for the sexual objectification of women (Smolak and Murnen, 2011).

Indeed, the growth in pubic hair depilation and its association with being 'sexy' has been the subject of much speculation. Adverts and social commentaries present hairless pubic areas as glamorous, sexy and liberating, and indisputably hairless genitals for both sexes are presented as a porn industry standard for genital beauty (Cokal, 2007). Psychologists therefore theorise that a trend towards pubic depilation may be a direct response to the increasing normalisation of the porn industry and other sexually explicit media, as well as exposure to a popular culture that idealises hairlessness and prepubescent female genitals (Schick et al, 2011).

Although the impact of this exposure on pubic hair removal practices and body confidence requires further empirical investigation, the evidence suggests that women who regularly remove pubic hair report more self-surveillance and self-objectification than those who do not (Smolak and Murnen, 2011). Self-objectification—treating oneself as an object to be manipulated or shaped into something that is sexually attractive to men—is associated with body shame, self-loathing, depression and low self-esteem (Tiggemann, 2011).

Conclusion

Body hair removal is an established social norm for women, and evidence suggests that society is at the threshold of a shift towards complete pubic hair removal becoming normative too. Undoubtedly, the majority of women who engage in depilation as part of their regular beauty regimen rarely question the complex combination of social pressures, expectations and influences—from peers, partners, the media and the porn industry—that dictate their practices. Further to this, mothers who share and encourage hair removal practices do so innocuously and in part to prevent their daughter's exposure to social ridicule and stigma if they appear 'hairy' in front of their peers.

It is important to note that body hair is a natural sign of sexual maturity and that the disgust associated with it is socially and culturally generated. It should also be remembered that body hair and its removal is another source of body image distress; its presence causes body shame and anxiety and,

whether or not women believe their actions are motivated by choice or social pressure, its removal can be painful, takes effort, time and money, and potentiates avoidable health conditions.

Challenging well-established social norms that provide imperatives to women to alter their bodies is difficult at an individual level. However, for those working with children and young people, Braun et al (2013) posit that it is vital to intervene by making the topic of body hair and pubic hair practices explicit, and by providing the next generation with the tools to question these norms—particularly before pubic hair removal becomes mandatory

Key points

- Body hair is both physiologically natural and an indicator of sexual maturity, yet its presence on a female body is regarded as culturally and socially unacceptable
- Those who choose not to depilate visible body hair can be subject to ridicule and abuse by comments that question their femininity, sexuality and hygiene
- Recent years have seen an increase in body hair removal with a greater and younger proportion of women and girls, and men, succumbing to social pressures to pursue a smooth hairless body and pubic area
- A trend towards pubic depilation may reflect society's discomfort with the adult female body and the normalisation of sexually explicit media that venerates the highly sexualised prepubescent body and sexually objectifies women
- The presence of body hair causes body shame, anxiety and self-consciousness. Its removal can be painful, takes considerable effort, time, money, and potentiates avoidable health conditions
- Young women and girls may benefit from education and support to question and challenge the social, cultural and media pressures that drive the pursuit for a hairless body

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