



Unwanted facial hair: How much is too much?

By Dr. Benjamin Barankin

There's a startling statistic that claims the anxiety and depression associated with excessive facial hair in women can affect quality of life in much the same way as a diagnosis of gynecological or breast cancer. At first thought this seems an unimaginable reaction. After all, it's simply a case of excessive hair growth on the face or neck and it is certainly not life-threatening.

Yet life is not that simple or straightforward. One has just to look at the many medical conditions such as erectile dysfunction, overactive bladder and skin conditions such as

eczema and vitiligo that don't shorten life expectancy, but can still have a profound, life-altering effect on people. Unwanted facial hair (UFH) is seen as a condition warranting treatment in women, as facial hair in men is seen as part of being manly.

Matters are complicated by the mixture of feelings, behaviours and emotions that crop up when dealing with UFH. Women tell me they are so embarrassed and shy about the problem that they put off bringing it up, even to me—but that it bothers them every day. Many believe they

have tried every solution either at home or with an aesthetician, and that there is nothing more they can do.

Medical conditions that affect the most visible part of the body—the face—should never be marginalized. If there is one piece of advice I can give that will make a difference, it is to find the courage to seek diagnosis and medical treatment. No one should have to experience the shame, depression, self-consciousness and loss of self-esteem that often characterize UFH and other visible skin and hair conditions. Once you bring

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UFH up for discussion with your doctor, you will feel liberated and open to facing the problem and looking at the treatment options.

Understanding the condition

A few key questions may help you better understand the condition.

What is unwanted facial hair?

UFH is a medical condition that causes too much hair to grow on a woman's face and neck, in areas not normally or culturally expected.

What causes unwanted facial hair?

A variety of factors such as genetics, hormones and even medications can cause UFH at any age. Sometimes we simply don't know the cause.

Is unwanted facial hair preventable?

While UFH generally isn't preventable and tends to be a long-term issue, a logical starting point is to determine if there are ways to control it. If you are overweight, then losing weight will be key to reducing your amount of hormones associated with increased facial hair growth.

Who does unwanted facial hair affect?

UFH can affect women of all ages, skin types and hair colour. Family history and ethnicity can influence your likelihood of developing UFH. In addition, women with male-pattern hair growth in other body areas (i.e., hirsutism) are more prone to UFH.

How is unwanted facial hair managed?


There are many ways to remove or treat UFH. Treatment options usually include a combination of hair-removal methods (e.g., plucking, shaving, threading, waxing, electrolysis, laser

therapy) and prescription therapy (topical and oral). The kind of treatment or combination of treatments you decide upon depends on the severity of your UFH, whether other areas of the body are also affected and the commitment you are willing to make to effectively manage it. Available options can vary in effectiveness, degree of discomfort and cost.

Ruling out other medical problems

Before starting any treatment, it is important to first rule out underlying medical conditions. If you are experiencing a rapid increase or sudden onset of facial hair growth, and signs of increased male characteristics, it is important to see your physician. In addition, if your periods are irregular or you also have significant acne, again speak with your physician.

Your self-esteem and mental well-being are an important part of your health. If you are struggling emotionally with your UFH, make sure you take the time to speak with your medical team. Share your feelings and concerns. It may seem like a minor medical issue to discuss, but stress and unhappiness do have an impact on your overall health. Regardless of where you are in your UFH journey, it is important to know that there are options.

In beginning to manage your UFH, it is up to you to take the first step. By raising the subject with your physician, you will be able to benefit from an open discussion on the best course of action for you. 

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Taking control of unwanted facial hair

1. Knowledge is power:

Learn as much as you can through excellent Canadian information resources, such as the dedicated page at canadianskin.ca.

2. Speak to your doctor:

Note that your physician will expect you to acknowledge that UFH is bothering you. Take the first step.

3. Be honest: Tell your doctor how you feel.

4. Follow the treatment plan:

Treatments only work if you follow the directions exactly. Let's face it—hair can be stubborn!

5. Be patient:

Improvement takes time and can vary according to the treatment prescribed. Always ask what to expect, including the time needed to see results.