



Don't forget health and safety when choosing a hair removal treatment

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Body and Mind staff

The weather is warming up, and it's time to replace slacks with shorts, turtlenecks with tank tops.

After peeling off layers of winter wear in favor of summer styles, many people are plagued with anxiety about unwanted body hair. Annoyance soon follows in a seemingly endless routine of shaving, plucking and tweezing.

Weary of such temporary methods, more consumers are seeking out services, such as waxing, electrolysis and laser hair removal, which offer longer-term results. But each of those hair removal methods has its own health and safety considerations that must be taken into account.

Waxing

Waxing involves the **application of wax** on the area to be treated and then removing the wax with a quick motion, pulling the hair out of the follicle. Areas commonly treated through waxing include the eyebrows, underarms, legs, back and bikini area. Hair removed by waxing typically will not grow back for at least three weeks.

Consumers need to be vigilant to assure they are getting waxing services that won't jeopardize their health, said Deborah English, an esthetician at **Colour Forte** in Mechanicsburg. That's because waxing leaves hair follicles open for about 24 hours, making the treated area vulnerable to infection.

"Wax is not completely germ or debris free, and cross contamination is very possible unless the technician is adhering to a strict regimen of sanitation and disinfecting," English said. "The waxing room should be like a doctor's exam room."

One of the most important rules is no double-dipping. The person performing the service should use a new applicator each time he or she applies wax.

Having clean equipment goes beyond changing applicators, English said. The technician should be wearing disposable gloves and changing them often. The waxing table should be disinfected and sheets changed after every client. All implements used should be washed in hot, soapy water and soaked in a hospital grade disinfectant.

Waxing can be painful, but consumers can ease the pain by taking an anti-inflammatory drug, such as ibuprofen, 30 minutes before treatment, English said. Drinking alcohol immediately before waxing should be avoided because

alcohol can make skin more sensitive and prone to redness and inflammation.

Electrolysis

During electrolysis, a very thin probe is inserted into a hair follicle, a small amount of electrical current is applied, and the hair is removed. Electrolysis can be used on all areas of the body except inside the nose and deep inside the ear, according to Esther Rhinier, president of the **Pennsylvania Society of Electrologists**.

Electrolysis can lead to permanent results, but such results usually require multiple trips to an electrologist. The number of electrolysis treatments needed depends on the size of the area to be treated, the density of hair growth, whether there are in-grown hairs and level of pain tolerance. Electrolysis is not painless, but electrologists can use different modalities and different intensities of current to tailor the treatment to the client's preferences, Rhinier said.

Consumers considering an electrologist should ask whether the electrologist uses sterile equipment, including probes, gloves and other tools, said Nancy Anderson, an electrologist in Shrewsbury. Asking how long an electrologist has been practicing also is important because electrologists who have been in the business a long time often have more experience on how to safely treat consumers with a variety of skin types, Anderson said.

Consumers also should ask whether the electrologist is certified by the American Electrology Association, Rhinier said. Certified electrologists must pass an exam and pursue continuing education and/or be retested to maintain certification.

"People need to find someone who has been in business for a while with the experience and the credentials to back it up," Rhinier said.

Laser hair removal

Lasers help remove unwanted hair by sending a low-energy beam through the skin, a beam that is absorbed by the dark pigment in the hair follicle. Like electrolysis, laser hair removal usually requires multiple treatments to have the desired effects. It is best suited for light-skinned, dark-haired individuals.

There are several possible side effects to laser hair removal, according to the **American Academy of Dermatology**. These side effects include pain, swelling around the hair follicle, blistering, herpes simplex outbreaks and bacterial infections. Temporary lightening or darkening of the skin can also occur.

Because of the possibility of these side effects, the academy cautions that consumers only use providers who either are medical doctors or who operate under the supervision of doctors. The academy also recommends that consumers choose providers who will make a pre-treatment assessment of the clients' skin type, hair color, thickness of hair, medical history, previous hair removal methods and presence of tattoos in the treatment area, among other factors.

There are several questions a consumer should ask a prospective provider of laser hair removal services, said Dr. Deborah Farrell of **Farrell Laser and Cosmetic Medicine Center** in Mechanicsburg. These questions include how much experience the provider has, how often services are provided and who will be delivering the treatment.

It is also good to know whether the provider owns the laser equipment to be used because owning the equipment generally means the provider does enough services to be willing to invest in purchasing and maintaining equipment, Farrell said. In addition, a consumer can ask to speak to other people who have used the provider's services.

A complaint-based system

Pennsylvania's oversight system is limited when it comes to salon- and office-based hair-removal services, and much of the industry is self-regulated.

The state's system of disciplining providers is generally driven by consumer complaints, said Charlie Young, deputy press secretary for the Pennsylvania Department of State. So, it's especially important for consumers who experience problems while receiving a hair-removal treatment to contact the department.

"If someone is harmed, we encourage them to file a complaint so we can investigate it," Young said.

To file a complaint, visit the department's **website**.

Health history can affect reaction to hair removal

In an age of thong underwear, body building and "Sex and the City," English doesn't see Americans' obsession with removing unwanted body hair abating anytime soon.

But, in their battle against unwanted hair, there are certain factors consumers should take into account, no matter which hair removal technique they choose, she said. A person's health history, medications, skin type and previous use of hair removal products can affect whether their next hair removal experience is good or bad, English said.

For example, diabetes and other medical conditions that result in poor circulation and/or impaired immunity can increase the risk of infection and slow healing after treatment. And topical treatments for wrinkles and acne can thin skin, making it more susceptible to damage.

For these reasons, it's important that a provider of hair removal services perform a comprehensive assessment of a client prior to offering services and be willing to answer questions, English said.

"You should go to someone who is willing to give you the extra time," she said. "And, if at any point you feel uncomfortable, you can stop."

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