

Laser hair removal is a common, safe and effective cosmetic procedure performed to removal unwanted facial and body hair.

Laser therapy involves using various wavelengths of light designed to selectively target the pigment (melanin) in the hair follicle. The laser beam is absorbed by this pigment, heat is generated, and the ability of the follicle to produce hair is disrupted. Because these lasers target pigment, light skin and dark coarse hair used to be the ideal combination. Newer lasers have made the procedure safer for patients with skin of color reducing the risk of skin color change during treatment. Laser safety and effectiveness however, is dependent upon the skill and experience of the person operating the equipment, along with the availability of appropriate laser equipment at the center which is performing the procedure.

Is laser hair removal “permanent”?

The resting phase of hair growth is extended after laser treatment. With the appropriate number of treatments correctly spaced apart, there is ~ 50-70% reduction in hair density in treated areas, although some patients have even better results. Typically, patients require 4-6 treatments spaced every 4-8 weeks. The hairs that remain become thinner in diameter and less coarse. Most patients notice hair reduction for 1-2 years without requiring maintenance treatment, while women with high levels of androgens may require maintenance treatment approximately every 6-12 months.

Is the laser more effective in certain areas of the body than others?

Laser hair removal is commonly performed on the upper lip, chin, underarms, face, neck, chest, abdomen, buttocks, pubic and bikini areas. Some areas of the body are more receptive to the process. The duration of the hair growth cycle varies by body site and is an important consideration as pigment is at its peak at the height of the active growth phase. For example, good results are often seen on the upper lip because the hair growth cycle is short (about 4 weeks). At any given time most (80%) facial hairs are in the active growth phase which enables the laser to more easily target many hair follicles. The chin area usually requires more treatments because the skin in that area is thicker and therefore the hair follicles are deeper. By contrast, when targeting the back and leg areas only 25% of the hairs are in the active growth phase at any given time so the laser will effectively target only a minority of the hair follicles in a given session. These areas require more sessions spaced out over a longer period of time.

Is it painful?

Most people describe a “stinging sensation” during the procedure. Laser hair removal in sensitive areas, such as the bikini and groin, is less painful than waxing those same areas. Sessions are well tolerated because the laser has a built-in cooling system to protect the skin from the heat that is generated. Usually refrigerated gel/ice packs will relieve any post treatment irritation.

Is it expensive?

Laser hair removal is considered a cosmetic procedure and is not covered by health insurance plans. The cost is dependent on the body surface area that a patient wishes to treat and the number of sessions that are required to treat the area. Costs may vary as a function of the level of expertise of the person performing the procedure.

Is there an alternative to laser therapy?

As an alternative to laser therapy, electrolysis refers to the insertion of an electrode in the skin to destroy individual hair follicles. It requires trained personnel and treatment over several sessions and can cause pain, scarring and skin discoloration. Electrolysis is ideal for removing small areas of coarse but sparse hair of any color. Laser therapy can be more expensive than electrolysis, but is faster and less painful than electrolysis, requiring fewer sessions.

Follow up

A successful management plan for unwanted hair removal is seldom established in one visit. Follow-up visits should occur to review progress and assess side effects, allowing for an individualized strategy that balances time spent on hair removal with prevention of further hair growth through medication. The best management of unwanted hair growth may require a team approach with several months of treatment commonly required before improvement of unwanted hair is observed.