

Removing Hair Safely

FDA's Center for Devices and Radiological Health regulates electrolysis equipment and lasers. Chemical depilatories, waxes, and shaving creams and gels fall under the jurisdiction of FDA's Office of Cosmetics and Colors in the Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition. The practice of professional hair removal is generally regulated by state and local authorities. Here are some tips related to common methods of hair removal.



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From creams to high-tech lasers, FDA regulates a host of hair removal options, each with its own risks and benefits.

Laser Hair Removal

In this method, a laser destroys hair follicles with heat.

Sometimes it is recommended that a topical anesthetic product be used before a laser hair removal procedure, to minimize pain. In these cases, FDA recommends that consumers discuss with a medical professional the circumstances under which the cream should be used, and whether the use is appropriate.

Those who decide to use a skin-numbing product should follow the directions of a health care provider and consider using a product that contains the lowest amount of anesthetic drugs possible. FDA's Center for Drug Evaluation and Research has received reports of serious and life-threatening side effects after use of large amounts of skin-numbing products for laser hair removal.

Side effects of laser hair removal can include blistering, discoloration after treatment, swelling, redness, and scarring. Sunlight should be avoided during healing after the procedure.

Epilators: Needle, Electrolysis, and Tweezers

Needle epilators introduce a fine wire close to the hair shaft, under the skin, and into the hair follicle. An electric current travels down the wire and destroys the hair root at the bottom of the follicle, and the loosened hair is removed with tweezers.

Medical electrolysis devices destroy hair growth with a shortwave radio frequency after a thin probe is placed in the hair follicle. Risks from these methods include infection from an unsterile needle and scarring from improper technique. Electrolysis is considered

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a permanent hair removal method, since it destroys the hair follicle. It requires a series of appointments over a period of time.

Tweezer epilators also use electric current to remove hair. The tweezers grasp the hair close to the skin, and energy is applied at the tip of the tweezer. There is no body of significant information establishing the effectiveness of the tweezer epilator to permanently remove hair.

Depilatories

Available in gel, cream, lotion, aerosol, and roll-on forms, depilatories are highly alkaline (or, in some cases, acidic) formulations that affect the protein structure of the hair, causing it to dissolve into a jellylike mass that the user can easily wipe from the skin. Consumers should carefully follow instructions and heed all warnings on the product label.

For example, manufacturers typically recommend conducting a preliminary skin test for allergic reaction and irritation. Depilatories should not be used for eyebrows or around eyes or on inflamed or broken skin.

FDA's Office of Cosmetics and Colors has received reports of burns, blisters, stinging, itchy rashes, and skin peeling associated with depilatories and other types of cosmetic hair removers.

Waxing, Sugaring, and Threading

Unlike chemical depilatories that remove hair at the skin's surface, these methods pluck hairs out of the follicle, below the surface.

With waxing, a layer of melted wax is applied to the skin and allowed to harden. (Cold waxes, which are soft at room temperature, allow the user to skip the steps of melting and hardening.) It is then pulled off quickly in the opposite direction of the hair growth, taking the uprooted hair with it. Labeling of waxes may caution that these products should not be used by people with diabetes and circulatory problems. Waxes should not be used over varicose veins, moles, or warts. Waxes also shouldn't be used on eyelashes, the nose, ears, or on nipples, genital areas, or on irritated, chapped, or sunburned skin. As with chemical depilatories, it can be a good idea to do a preliminary test on a small area for allergic reaction or irritation.

Sugaring is similar to waxing. A heated sugar mixture is spread on the skin, sometimes covered with a strip of fabric, and then lifted off to remove hair. Threading is an ancient technique in which a loop of thread is rotated across the skin to pluck the hair. All of these techniques may cause skin irritation and infection.



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Shaving

Shaving hair only when it's wet, and shaving in the direction in which the hairs lie, can help lessen skin irritation and cuts. It's important to use a clean razor with a sharp blade. Contrary to popular belief, shaving does not change the texture, color, or growth rate of hair. Razors and electric shavers are under the jurisdiction of the Consumer Product Safety Commission.

To see FDA's public health advisory about skin-numbing products, visit www.fda.gov/cder/drug/advisory/topical_anesthetics.htm

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