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GONE, BABY, GONE

A high-tech treatment could be the solution for extra hair. **Coco Myers** puts her best face forward

I've always had a little fuzz. When I look back at photos of myself at age nine, I can see a dusting of blond hairs catching the light. But I never gave the matter much thought until about six months ago, when the soft, downy strands suddenly became thicker. They began catching not only the light, but also sunscreen, makeup, and my attention. On a grown-up girl? Hirsute is not so cute.

Turns out, hormones are almost always to blame for hair that has gone into hyperdrive. When estrogen dips, testosterone—which all women have in varying amounts—comes into play, spurring extra growth in a classic male pattern: on the chin and upper lip, along the jaw. How much, and how light or dark, is very individual. While this type of hormonal change is most often triggered by perimenopause—the reason many women in their forties, such as I, find themselves fuzzier—it can also be due to non-age-related factors such as certain medications (steroids and diuretics) or weight gain, since an increase in fat can alter hormone levels. Imbalances can also spring from the adrenal glands or the ovaries (a condition called polycystic ovarian syndrome, in which the ovaries produce an overload of androgens), explains Valerie Callender, MD, a clinical assistant professor of dermatology at Howard University in Washington, DC. A simple blood test can determine if androgen levels are high, at which point an endocrinologist can identify the source and prescribe treatment. But there's no such fix for my case of fuzz, since my drop in estrogen during perimenopause is permanent, according to Callender.

Since I'm not quite ready to sit around and grow whiskers, I begin to investigate my options. The most basic—and superficial—methods of hair removal include depilatories, like the classic Nair, at about \$5 a kit. The creams contain chemicals that dissolve the keratin bonds in the hair shaft,

breaking it off just below the skin. Bleaching kits are another inexpensive at-home trick. But both options can irritate sensitive skin—not good for a bump-prone type like myself. As for shaving, stubble springs to mind, though a rough beard is apparently only a myth. According to Kenneth Beer, MD, a dermatologist in West Palm Beach, Florida, shaved hair won't return any thicker—"but it grows right back, and you end up shaving every day," he says. No thanks.

Next, I considered methods that go to the root of the matter. Tweezing's a breeze, but it only makes sense for small amounts of hair. Same goes for electrolysis, in which an electric probe destroys follicles one at a time. A chin or lip, maybe, but an entire complexion? Forget it. Too painstaking, painful—and pricey. Electrolysis costs vary widely (anywhere from \$100 to \$500 for a single area, multiplied by 20 or more sessions a year for one or two years), but it's safe to say you'll likely shell out thousands of dollars to finish a face. What about waxing? It's relatively affordable (as little as \$50 for a full face), efficient (you can defuzz large

areas at a time), and the effects last four to six weeks, the length of hair's growth cycle. But not every strand will be at the same point in the cycle at the same time—i.e., long enough to grab—so regrowth tends to be uneven. Plus, I'm wary of the after-effects: Every time I've waxed my brows, I've had to endure days of red, pimply bumps. There has to be a better way.

I look into laser hair removal, arguably the most cutting-edge and effective procedure out there. Laser is much less painful and time-consuming than electrolysis, plus it treats large areas at a time. But like electrolysis, it can be expensive: anywhere from \$300 to \$1,000 for a whole face, per session—four to eight required, usually every four weeks or so. Alas, even if I could afford the treatments, I couldn't do them for the simple reason that the wavelength targets pigment in the follicle bulb; my baby blond hair wouldn't attract enough attention.

Then I read about Vaniqa (clinical name: eflornithine hydrochloride), a topical hair inhibitor FDA-approved in 2000. As Miami dermatologist Loretta Ciraldo, MD,



explains, "The cream blocks the enzyme necessary for growth, so hair comes in very slowly." It's not a magic elixir and it works over time—somewhere in that four-to-eight-week range. While many dermatologists are Vaniqa proponents (especially when it's used in combo with laser), others, such as Beer, have yet to be impressed. Benefits are debatable, and the price is on the high side (\$60 to \$90 a tube, which lasts about six months), but the side effects are few to none, so I can't see any harm in trying it.

First, I need a prescription—and some expert advice. I visit my go-to skin doc, Macrene Alexiades-Armenakas, MD, PhD, a dermatologist in Manhattan. She understands my plight. "Peach fuzz is a big problem for a lot of my patients," says Dr. A., who'd been researching the topic and had just devised a photodynamic therapy (PDT) to thwart overactive hair growth. First, she applies Levulan, a light-sensitive solution used to zap acne and sun damage. Once that soaks in, she uses a light (different from that of pigment-seeking laser) to activate the drug, destroying—or at least damaging—follicles. "I've been working on finding just the right wavelength," she says.

Dr. A. is eager to try her protocol, and I'm more than willing. Of course! What did I have to lose but fuzz? She's hoping to get a 20 percent reduction in regrowth per session (each can cost up to \$800) and predicts that four or five treatments, spaced about a month apart, would result in full abatement. Then comes the not-so-great news: To do the PDT treatment, all my facial hair would have to be waxed off to allow the Levulan to seep into the root and, for the sake of the experiment, to gauge how many hairs grew back. I couldn't wimp out now! I decide to entrust my face to the experts at Completely Bare, the fashionable hair-removal spa with spots in Manhattan, Palm Beach, and Scarsdale, New York. Once again, my timing is good. Cindy Barshop, the owner, has been working on her own fuzz-busting treatment using a new type of facial putty. The beauty of the putty: It's applied at a low temperature and shrink-wraps around hair, not adhering to skin—not as traumatic (in theory) as ripping off wax with gauze.

The relaxing music and botanical aromas almost trick me into thinking I'm getting a facial. But yowza! The putty method may be less painful than waxing, but only by a hair. A half hour later, when I step out into the world without my fuzzy topcoat, I feel vulnerable, exposed—as if I've left my sweater behind. The next morning, most of the redness is gone, but there they are: pimply bumps, though, thankfully, just on my chin and upper lip. I apply a cor-

tisone cream and wait. A couple days later, the bumps subside and I can appraise my face. And? I look...different. My oldest son says he misses my fuzz. My husband says I look shiny—not necessarily in a good way. I check the mirror again. I look a bit like a mannequin—with a few lines and creases, of course. A panicked call to Dr. A. reassures me that the shine is likely due to the dull top layer of skin being removed, an effect that will fade.

Sure enough, by the time I go in for the PDT treatment two days later, my com-

plexion is more matte. I sit in a dimly lit room letting the Levulan absorb, then lie on a table for the PDT—a painless few minutes of a light moving over the planes of my face. That's it. I leave with a broad-brim hat and Dr. A.'s strict instructions to stay out of the sun for 48 hours or risk a burn, since Levulan temporarily makes skin ultrasensitive, not to mention pink, like a bad blush job. Within a day or so, my skin resumes a normal hue, and I, a normal

routine. A couple weeks later, however, I notice, up close in the fluorescent glare of the gym's mirrored wall, bits of blond fuzz poking up like spring shoots along the sides of my face. Is the fuzz all growing back? I decide to wait a full six weeks to let Dr. A. judge the results. To her eye, only about 25 percent of the hair has resurfaced—much less than the 80 percent she'd assumed—though we won't know for certain until a few more cycles have come and gone.

Meanwhile, I figure it couldn't hurt

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to have a few makeup-artist tips at the ready. I put in a call to NYC's Joanna Schlip, whose advice is simple: Less is better. "Avoid foundation in areas with the most hair, like along the sides of the face," she says. "Just dab it where you really need it." She also likes loose powder (which slips off hairs and sticks to skin), particularly the mineral type—it diffuses light, taking the focus off fuzz.

Two more weeks go by with no significant hair increase, except in one spot: my upper lip. Since the area is too small to merit PDT, I figure I can putty or wax (and put up with the pimply reaction). But there's one treatment left to try: threading. This technique, in which strands are wrapped and pulled by a string, is comparable in price to waxing but supposedly easier on skin, since only the hairs are involved.

I stop in at Shobha, a hair-removal salon in Manhattan, where I lie back in a comfortable chair and submit my lip. The comfort is short-lived. Even with the numbing cream, I find myself gripping the arms of the chair. The specialist tells me that threading, like waxing, hurts less each time. But more important: Will I get a bad reaction? By the next day, soothing gels notwithstanding, there they are: the telltale bumps.

Perhaps they're a metaphor. The truth is, there were bumps all along the way in my pursuit of a hair-free face. Removal, I've learned, isn't an exact science. There will always be a stray strand, some discomfort. But with my face half as fuzzy as before, I can't complain. Things are looking pretty peachy.

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