



BEAUTY

Stiff upper lip

With society's unforgiving standards of beauty, facial hair on women is considered an aesthetic taboo. Yet many women have it – and they tackle it in a variety of ways. Cressida Connolly considers a hairy issue

You always remember the first time. Mine was on a sunlit morning in my late teens, lolling across a four-poster bed with my first boyfriend. We were chatting contentedly, all was right with the world, and then it happened: there was a pause in our conversation before he looked at me especially closely, homing in as if he might be about to kiss me. But he didn't. Instead, he said, matter-of-factly: "You really ought to do something about that moustache."

These are words that every woman dreads to hear. Facial hair – or unwanted facial hair, as it's always called, as if there were another, wanted sort – is the last taboo. Breast and lip implants, even colonic irrigation, have all become acceptable topics of conversation, while women's whiskers remain forbidden. Even among close female friends, they're rarely discussed. We're so touchy about the subject that a mere mention of it can threaten a relationship: a friend who was going on holiday with a new boyfriend cried for the first three days of the trip when, the sunlight shining in through the plane window, he made a chance remark about her facial hair. She married someone else.

There's nothing new about women and facial hair. Cleopatra had a moustache (which she shaved), as did Elizabeth I. The chances are that Helen of Troy had one. Tweezers were in use from as early as 3500 BC. The ancient Egyptians had depilatory creams containing

nanny goat's gall and powdered viper and used pumice and bronze razors. Threading – still widely used, especially among Asian women – was devised many centuries ago in Arabia. Native American women used clam shells for plucking. In England, tweezers have been found with female remains in many Anglo-Saxon burial sites. Even Chaucer mentions a woman using them. Throughout history and across cultures, women's facial hair has

been reviled, with the notable exception of the Qajar dynasty (1785-1925) in Iran, when faint moustaches were considered attractive on women; so much so, that many applied mascara to their upper lips.

Today, moustaches – or rather, our hang-ups about them – are big business. It's estimated that 41 million women in America alone have unwanted facial hair, about half of whom do something to remove hair every week. Each of them will pay money for their preferred method of removal, whether it's simply plucking a rogue hair from the chin with expensive tweezers, or the latest in laser treatment. I spoke to a woman who's been having electrolysis every five weeks for 11 years. She's not vain, but after volunteering to listen to children read at a local primary school, she was stung into action when a child interrupted his story to ask: "Why have you got a moustache?" At around £20 a session, she has spent in excess of £2,000 on the procedure.

Almost all facial hair is normal. We are mammals, after all. Thankfully, Dr Christopher Rowland Payne, consultant dermatologist at The London Clinic, doesn't see any evidence of women becoming hairier: "People's expectations of what they should look like are much higher than they used to be," he says, "which makes more of us seek help to remove excess hair." The bad news is that facial hair can be a symptom of polycystic ovarian >





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syndrome (PCOS), along with irregular periods, pimples and a thinning of head hair. A simple ovarian scan to detect PCOS should always be considered for any women worried about excessive facial hair. Very, very occasionally, a sudden growth of facial hair can signify a pituitary tumour.

Assuming your facial hair is only a cosmetic problem, there are two main ways to get rid of it: depilation, which removes hair from above the skin's surface and includes shaving, trimming and creams; and epilation, which means getting down to the root of each hair and includes tweezing, waxing, sugaring, threading, electrolysis and laser treatment. Bleaching doesn't remove the hair at all, but makes it much less noticeable.

Each has its pros and cons, with the exception of shaving, which is always a terrible mistake, because of stubble.

If you only have one or two noticeable hairs – on your chin, say, or at the corners of your mouth – plucking or even close trimming might do the trick. If your skin is pale, bleaching can work and over the years seems to weaken even strong, dark hairs. An acquaintance who has used Jolen bleach for years has now realised that it makes her moustache more noticeable – she's Asian – and so is having electrolysis instead. In the interests of feminine solidarity, I'm prepared to reveal that I've bleached my own moustache ever since that first boyfriend pointed it out, with pretty good results; although the

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peroxide does make the hairs glint, slightly, in bright light. (*A Fish Called Wanda* contains perhaps the only cinematic reference to moustache bleaching; in which Jamie Lee Curtis emerges, gloriously unpenitent, from the bathroom, her top lip submerged beneath a thick icing of white cream. I wish I had suchchutzpah, but apart from the time I bleached in a car on the way to a wedding, I hide away to do mine. Bleaching my moustache is the thing I would most hate to be caught doing.)

Waxing is quick, easy and relatively painless, although because it removes all the hairs it can look a bit odd, because skin which is totally bald doesn't have the same reflection of light

..... : **WHERE TO GO**

: **LASER HAIR REMOVAL**

- : • Pulsar Laser Clinics, £50. Call 0114 235 6585 for your nearest salon
- : • Skin Secrets (020 7580 8995). Intense Pulsed Light laser hair removal, £80

: **THREADING**

- : • Vaishaly (020 7224 6088), £12
- : • Kamini at Nyumba (020 7408 1489), from £20

: **WAXING**

- : • Bliss (020 7584 3888). Lip wax, £12
- : • SPace NK (020 727 8002). Lip wax, £12
- : • Charles Worthington (020 7631 1370). Lip or chin wax or bleach, £18

: **ELECTROLYSIS**

- : • Urban Retreat at Harrods (020 7893 8333). £20 for a 15 minute treatment
- : • Elizabeth Arden Red Door Salon & Spa (020 7629 4488). £14 for a 15 minute treatment

as the rest of the face. According to beauty therapist Vaishaly, the heat of the wax combined with the trauma of ripping the hairs from the roots may give some people spots. "Regular waxers may also suffer from a shadow where the hair coming through is visible under the skin," she says. Apparently, it's not only dark-haired women that this affects: "New facial hair growing through on blondes tends to be darker too," says Vaishaly,

who prefers threading to waxing. Threading works by grabbing hairs at the skin's surface between two threads twisted together. It is the tension caused by the threads pulling apart and winding back together that catches the hairs and whisks them out from the roots. "Threading takes seconds and will give you three to four hair-free weeks," says Vaishaly, "while waxing can only grab hairs of a certain length and at worst will only last a few days."

"If I were a woman and having to attend to facial hair more than four times a year, I might have laser hair treatment," says Dr Rowland Payne. "Before we had lasers, electrolysis was the best treatment, but it can take a long, long time." Rather than using fine needles to carry the electric current to the hair's root to kill it, modern electrolysis uses a gel applied to the skin that helps conduct the current, delivered

via a probe, to the hair follicle. This method is less painful (it hurts about as much as eyebrow tweezing) and less likely to result in scarring (even expert therapists may miss the follicle and break the skin) but it is a slow method of epilation as each follicle has to be treated several times to 'kill off the cells that produce new hairs.

The word "permanent" is slippery when it comes to describing how long a hair-removal treatment may last. It can denote a length of time as short as six weeks. Laser treatment is the closest thing to a cure, although it doesn't halt re-growth completely but thins each hair. "With each shot the girth of the hair shrinks", explains Dr Rowland Payne. "If you imagine that each hair is a tree-trunk when you begin treatment, then it'll be only a young sapling by the end." Lasers work by hunting black pigment. This used to mean that they were only truly effective on people with dark hair on light skin. The latest Alexandrite lasers, though, are refined enough to treat people with darker skin, although these subjects may need a greater number of sessions than their paler counterparts. Lasers, though, can cause the skin to smart and blotch, especially in people with darker complexions. Generally, the treatment is quick and relatively painless. Your skin is covered in a clear cooling gel which acts as a conductor. The eyes are shielded – either with goggles or cotton pads, and then the laser is delivered by a therapist using a hand-held gun a little like a barcode scanner that emits a quick blast of light. The laser zaps, flashes red, you flinch and then feel an intense warmth in the skin that gradually cools after a few minutes. Treating the upper lip may require four to six zaps with the laser each session. Between times, only trimming the hair is allowed – no bleaching or plucking.

Perhaps it's time for women to stop worrying about facial hair. A downy complexion can be sweet, after all. There's even an old Italian word – *baffona* – for a woman with a small but not unpleasant moustache. Conspicuous moustaches have done no harm to the reputations of painter Frida Kahlo, nor singer Patti Smith. On America's west coast, a group of radical lesbians are taking male hormones, enabling them to grow lustrous moustaches and convincing sideburns while retaining their physical female characteristics. Photographs of these women are troubling, provocative; subverting our ideas of femininity and the erotic. Maybe drooping cowboy or jaunty Mexican moustaches will be all the rage on the catwalks next season. But somehow I don't think so. ■