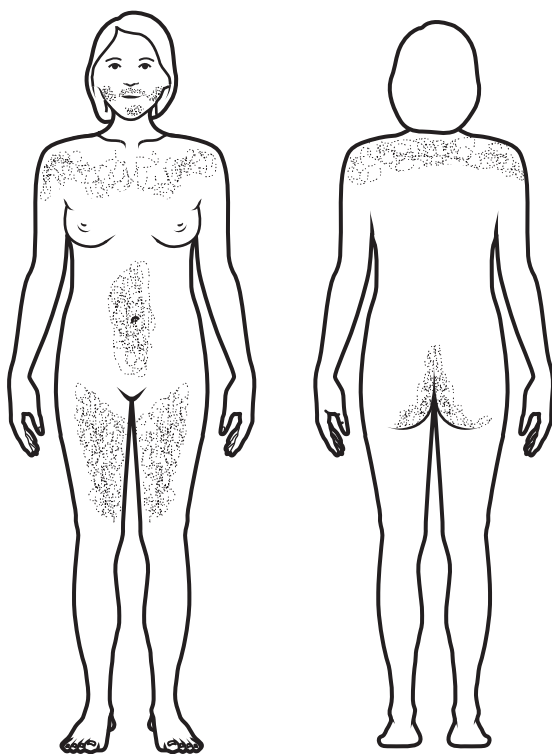


What is hirsutism?

Hirsutism is the presence of excessive body or facial hair. For women, the areas most affected are the 'beard' area (upper lip, chin, front of the ears), the chest, the abdomen and the front of the thighs. The condition varies from being mild and hardly noticeable to being obvious.

What is normal?

Many women feel they are very 'hairy', but if this occurs in the normal female hair-growth areas (such as the armpits, forearms, pubic area and around the nipples) there is no cause for concern. A tendency to be 'hairy' may run in families or be prevalent in some races, such as those from the Mediterranean region. Even if the hair growth seems to be in a male pattern, there is usually no serious underlying cause and the problem can be treated. About 10% of Australian women are affected.



Sites of unwanted hair in women

What causes hirsutism?

It is due to excessive hair growth caused by overactive male sex hormones (present in all women) at the hair root. The reason for this is unclear. Often hairiness runs in families or is more common in certain races. It is rare in Asians. Certain medications, such as anti-epilepsy drugs and some oral contraceptive pills, can cause it. It is usually associated with polycystic ovarian syndrome and uncommonly it can be caused by cysts or tumours of the ovaries or adrenal glands.

What can be done?

Your doctor will need to take a full medical history and examine you to assess your hair growth. A blood test may be necessary.

What is the treatment?

- Your doctor may be able to reassure you that your hair growth is normal, and therefore no therapy is needed.
- Cosmetic measures (such as bleaching, waxing or shaving) or treatment with depilatory creams or electrolysis can help. Bleaching is a simple and good option. Your doctor will advise what will suit you. There is no evidence that shaving increases the rate of hair growth, but plucking the hair does stimulate growth. Do not pluck hairs around the lips and chin. Laser epilation may also help but seems to be most suited for dark hair on a light skin and lasts about 6 months.
- Medical treatment with drugs such as spironolactone can be used if your hair growth is excessive and causes understandable social embarrassment. It will probably take at least 3 months for you to notice any difference in your hairiness, and for most women the hair grows back once they stop taking the medications. Eflornithine is a new cream used to slow regrowth of unwanted facial hair following laser treatment.