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Are Epilators More Likely to Cause Ingrown Hairs? We Investigate



If you're someone who removes their body hair, there's a good chance you've explored the many different methods for getting the job done and are aware of the pros and cons of each. Among these options is epilation.

Though longer lasting than shaving and easier to DIY than waxing, epilation—in which the hair is pulled directly from the root by an electric or manual device—does come with a catch: Because of the way the hair is removed, you're more likely to

DIY Ingrown Hair Remedies

But there are ways you can reduce the likelihood of getting pesky ingrowns. To learn more about using epilators—and how to avoid those unwanted follicular intruders—we reached out to dermatologists Christine Choi Kim, MD, Shari Sperling, DO, and board-certified plastic surgeon, Dr. Michael Horn.

MEET THE EXPERT

- Christine Choi Kim, MD, is a board-certified medical and cosmetic dermatologist based in Los Angeles.
- Shari Sperling, DO, is a board-certified dermatologist based in New Jersey.
- **Dr. Michael Horn is a board-certified plastic surgeon based in Chicago.**

Here, dermatologists and plastic surgeons weigh in on whether epilators can really cause ingrown hairs.

What is an Epilator?

For those who do not know exactly what this tool is, we'll first bring you up to speed. Made famous in the 1980s by a brand called Epilady, epilators are

electric devices that use coil springs or tweezers. "It's similar to waxing in that it pulls hair from the root," says Sperling, though "it can pluck slightly shorter hairs than waxing can."

Today, you can find options at a wide range of price points with a variety of features, including manual epilators, cordless epilators, and epilators you can use either wet or dry.

Do Epilators Cause Ingrown Hairs?

As with any form of hair removal, there are cons to using epilators, including moderate pain (Choi Kim notes that it is more painful than shaving), the potentially heavy price tags of the devices, and yes, ingrown hairs.

While ingrown hairs, or hairs that grow back into the skin, can be caused by any form of hair removal, they do tend to be a bit more common when using epilators than with some other methods. According to Choi Kim, it comes down to how the hair is being removed.

"With shaving, waxing, or dermaplaning there is exfoliation of the stratum corneum along with grooming of hairs," she says. "Epilators remove hairs by the roots without exfoliating the stratum corneum, so when the hairs start to grow back there is a higher likelihood of them getting trapped underneath the surface of the skin, curling under, and becoming ingrown."

As Dr. Horn explains, "any hair removal treatment has the potential to cause ingrown hairs, as it's simply the result of a hair breaking and curling back into the skin." But epilators stand apart from the pack. "If used correctly, epilators shouldn't cause ingrown hairs, as they're meant to remove the hair from the root," Horn says. "To avoid ingrown hairs during hair removal, make sure your skin is exfoliated in order to ensure that the pores are clear of dead skin, allowing the hair to come through easily."

How to Properly Use an Epilator

CLn BodyWash \$20

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If you're the type that never reads the directions before putting together that new piece of furniture, you'll want to change your ways when it comes to using an epilator. "Since there are a lot of epilators on the market, follow the instructions for your particular device," says Choi Kim. She also advises shaving a few days before epilation so your hairs are in prime position ("you want them to be easily grabbed by the epilator but not too long") and washing your skin with an antimicrobial cleanser to get ahead of infections. Her pick: CLn's BodyWash (\$36).

After you're well versed on your device, it's time to take it for a test drive:

"Start on a less sensitive area of your body first to practice your technique—arms or legs, not bikini," says Choi Kim. And remember, practice makes perfect. The

more you use the epilator, you can get the correct position so it becomes a muscle memory when using the unit.

How to Prevent Ingrown Hairs From Epilators

There are moves you can make to reduce the likelihood of ingrown hairs, however. First, make sure your device is in good working order. If you've dropped your epilator or not taken proper care of it, then the chances it will cause ingrown hair are higher. If the device is damaged in any way, it is more likely to cause irritation. For example, if the tweezers are bent it may not grasp the hair properly or at the correct angle, and that can cause breakage above or below the skin, potentially causing ingrown hair.

Start by holding your skin taut. If your skin is held firm while working the device, you'll be more likely to remove the entire piece of hair from the follicle, and not just break it above or below the skin, potentially leading to ingrown hairs.

Also important? Follow the manufacturers' directions for exactly how to clean the device, because bacteria can easily enter undetected—and anytime you remove hair out of the follicle, you may be leaving it an easy target for bacteria to enter. “Clean it regularly to keep the epilator working consistently and to prevent bacterial or fungal infections,” says Choi Kim. “Even if it is a device that can be used wet, don't leave it in your shower where it can breed bacteria and fungus easily.” She also stresses the importance of not sharing the device with others. Consider storing it in a case to keep it dust and bacteria-free.

How to Care for Skin Post-Epilation

SkinBetter AlphaRet Exfoliating Peel Pads \$105

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It's important to take care of yourself after epilation, too, including frequent exfoliation—remember, it's those dead skin cells in follicles that keep the hair from growing in the correct direction in the first place.

“Use an exfoliating product like SkinBetter's AlphaRet Exfoliating Peel Pads regularly to prevent ingrown hairs,” says Choi Kim. “Start once a week, and if well-tolerated you can use it up to three times a week.” If you experience any redness or irritation post-epilation, Choi Kim suggests applying “a calming OTC moisturizer with hydrocortisone like Vanicream 1% Hydrocortisone Anti-Itch Cream (\$10) twice a day as needed.”

Now that you know how to correctly use an epilator, it is time to find the right one to help you get silky smooth skin. If you want to remove hair from smaller areas, such as your face or underarms, the Braun Epilator Silk-Epil (\$150) is a great choice.

The Final Takeaway

Braun Epilator Silk-Epil \$113

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The bottom line is that epilation comes with some benefits. “Epilation is less likely to cause nicks and cuts compared to shaving and is probably less traumatic than waxing hairs from delicate, sensitive areas like genital skin,” says Choi Kim.

The devices are also fairly easy to use and can be used on various body parts, though Sperling notes "some areas may be more sensitive than others." Plus, epilation does not have to be performed as frequently as shaving, and regrowth may feel softer and less prickly. Additionally, "prolonged use of an epilator can cause thinner or sparse hair," says Sperling.

In general, look for an epilator that is cordless so there's no need to worry about cords getting in the way or having only so far of a reach. It also makes them easy to take with you on the go. Remember, practice makes perfect—so give them a chance and learn what works for you.

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