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Excess Hair Growth

Hirsutism is the medical term for excess hair on a woman in the places only adult men "should" grow hair. At least 25% and as much as 85% of normal middle-aged women remove unwanted facial and body hair, although few of these women are termed hirsute. For most women, the tendency towards hirsutism is inherited. Excess hair growth may be present in both the female and male family members. Hirsutism usually begins around puberty, but mild hirsutism can start at any age. Most women gradually develop more facial or body hair with age.

Hypertrichosis is an excessive quantity of hair in a normal location. When a woman has a lot of hair on the calf of the leg, it would be called hypertrichosis and not hirsutism. Some women with will also have facial hair from hypertrichosis.

Hirsutism is usually caused by an increased sensitivity of the skin to a group of hormones called androgens (testosterone and androstenedione) or increased production of these hormones. Androgen disorders (hyperandrogenism) affect between 5% to 10% of all women.

Hyperandrogenism is increased levels of male hormone production in women. The most commonly seen symptom is irregular menstrual cycles. The causes of hyperandrogenism in women are as follows:

Chronic Anovulation - "The Polycystic Ovary Syndrome"

Idiopathic Hirsutism - Excess hair growth with normal menstrual cycles and normal hormone levels - the most common type.

Late Onset Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia - An inherited disorder of hormone metabolism that causes increased hair growth in women after puberty

Ovarian tumors - A rare cause of hirsutism

Adrenal causes - A more rare cause of hirsutism

Pregnancy related - Also rare, e.g. luteoma of pregnancy (tumor derived from the corpus luteum cells of the ovary)

Drugs - Some drugs (Dilantin, Minoxidil, others) can cause excess hair growth in women

Treatments for hyperandrogenism include oral contraceptives, Spironolactone and Flutamide. There is also a prescription cream that stops facial hair growth, Vaniqa (pronounced Van-ih-KA). Studies show it helps most women and has no major side effects. It is the only prescription product approved by the FDA and clinically proven to reduce the growth of unwanted facial hair in women.

Testing should include Testosterone (T) levels and Dehydroepiandrosterone sulfate (DHEAS). Others tests such as 17-hydroxyprogesterone, prolactin, T4, TSH, breast exam, and an endometrial biopsy may be indicated.