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Khloé Kardashian Thinks Eyebrow Threading Spreads Herpes—What You Should Know

And experts say it's a legitimate concern.



Fans of eyebrow threading swear by the hair-removal technique for its precision and because it gives brows a clean shape. But despite the hype, Khloé Kardashian refuses to try eyebrow threading for one specific reason: She's scared of getting herpes.

Kardashian wrote about her strong views on threading on her website and app this week. "I always darken my brows because they are naturally light, but to shape them, I wax and never, ever thread," she wrote. "I heard the grossest story about threading! Someone had herpes on their mouth and then the client got it on their brows! I don't thread because someone's saliva might be going on my face!"

It sounds like an urban legend, but experts say it can happen. In threading, a beautician or aesthetician uses thread to go through your eyebrow hairs row by row and pluck out the unwanted ones. Some technicians will hold one end of the thread in their mouths, which is problematic, Amesh A. Adalja, M.D., a board-certified infectious disease physician and affiliated scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, tells SELF. "If a person is using their mouth as part of their work, that's inherently going to cause problems because the mouth literally teems with bacteria," he explains.

Jennifer Haythe, M.D., assistant professor of medicine at Columbia University Medical Center, tells SELF that threading "clearly poses health risks." If a person has breaks in their skin, viruses like herpes and bacteria could be introduced, she says. If a technician has oral herpes—and, according to Johns Hopkins Medicine, up to 80 percent of people do—there's a chance the virus could go from their mouth and onto the thread, and infect someone's skin. Gary Goldenberg, M.D., medical director of the dermatology faculty practice at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, tells SELF that herpes can also be passed on if a person isn't wearing gloves and has herpes on their fingers, a condition known as herpetic whitlow. "It would be more likely to be herpes type 1, which is the fever blister virus," he says.

Herpes can get into a person's skin because threading, like many skin procedures, causes a breach in the skin that allows bacteria and viruses to gain access. "Anything like pulling out hair is going to allow any viruses in the vicinity to gain access," Adalja says. "Mild abrasions and pulling out hair will expose the area from which the hair was pulled." It's not just herpes people have to worry about: Sherry A. Ross, M.D., a women's health expert and author of *She-ology: The Definitive Guide to Women's Intimate Health, Period.*, tells SELF that threading can also raise a person's risk of getting a staph infection, a serious infection caused by bacteria that's commonly found on a person's skin, for the same reason.

But Tiffany Chowdhury of Browhaus in New York City, tells SELF that when using the mouth technique for threading, the part of the thread in the person's mouth does not touch the client's brows. However, the person's hands could touch their mouth and the client's skin. There is "definitely" still a risk of spreading herpes if the mouth end of the thread doesn't touch a person's eyebrows and/or skin because their hands will touch their mouths at some point, and then the thread, which touches the person's skin, Adalja says.

While you can get herpes from threading, Ross says that it's unlikely. "Oral herpes...starts as a blister and then breaks open and starts to ooze," during which point it's very contagious, she explains. But it's possible to be exposed to a person that has oral herpes at a less contagious time, lowering the odds that you'll get it, too. However, it can happen.

Herpes in your eyebrow would look like a cold sore or blister, Adalja says. And, while it may seem harmless, it's very important that it get treated. "If it gets into your eye, it can be dangerous and devastating and lead to blindness," he says. That's why doctors treat herpes around the eye area aggressively with oral medication like Valtrex or anti-viral creams (sometimes they use both at once, Adalja says).

Of course, spreading herpes through eyebrow waxing is no one's fault. You can pass the virus along even if you don't have an active outbreak and you take medication to lower your viral load, Brian A. Levine, M.D., and New York practice director for the Colorado Center for Reproductive Medicine, previously told SELF. But that doesn't mean you absolutely can't spread it to someone else while on the medicine. That's part of what makes herpes so common, but also part of why the stigma around it is totally unnecessary.

If you're considering threading, there are other considerations besides disease risk. Christine Gayski, a licensed medical esthetician in Mercy's MediSpa in Baltimore, tells SELF she doesn't administer it herself because of the risk and because of the potential for changing hair growth. "It can cause the hairs to come back shifted," she says. Instead, she recommends waxing or plucking to keep your eyebrows in order. Haythe agrees: "There are many other safer ways to shape eyebrows including waxing and using sterile tweezers."

That being said, if you're a threading devotee, you shouldn't panic over the idea of getting herpes in your eyebrows. If someone follows the proper hygienic procedures—they use a different thread on new patients, wears gloves, and doesn't use their mouth—it's unlikely that you'll get infected, Adalja says. "The risk is low if you go to a reputable place that uses all safety precautions," says Goldenberg. "But the risk is not zero."