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# We Asked Dermatologists How to Prevent Those Painful Ingrown Hairs by Your Vulva

Asking for a friend (that friend is you).



If you've ever taken a razor to any part of your body, you may have experienced painful ingrown hairs bubbling up where you expected dolphin-smooth skin instead. Nice reward for your efforts, eh? Ingrown hairs can be frustrating no matter what, but when they set up shop right next to your vulva (or even on it), it can take things to a whole new level of "can you not?"

Since no one is born with encyclopedic knowledge of how to handle ingrown hairs, we consulted dermatologists for the lowdown on why they form, what you're supposed to do about them, and how to keep them from happening altogether.

## Ingrown hairs can happen as a result of removing your hair by shaving, tweezing, waxing, or other similar methods.

So, get this: You have about *5 million* hair follicles sprinkled across your body, according to the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD). Each follicle contains a hair that grows through your skin.

Even if you engage in hair removal, hair will continue to grow from these follicles (unless you get laser hair removal, which damages the follicles so they can't produce hair). An ingrown hair happens when a hair that should be growing out of its follicle and away from your skin re-enters your skin instead, according to the Mayo Clinic. There, it causes inflammation that can lead to solid or pus-filled bumps, pain, itching, a bacterial infection, hyperpigmentation, and possibly permanent scarring, the Mayo Clinic says. And, instead of appearing normal, an ingrown hair might look like a hoop with both ends embedded into your skin.

The hair on and around your vulva is particularly susceptible to becoming ingrown because it tends to be coarse and curly, [Gary Goldenberg, M.D.](#), assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital, tells SELF. That makes it more likely that the hair will curl into your skin when it's growing back after you've removed it.

Also, if you shave, every time you drag that razor over your hair you're creating sharp edges on each strand that can make them more likely to revert into your skin, the Mayo Clinic says.

## Not removing your pubic hair is the best way to prevent ingrowns. But if that's not your thing, you can still take certain actions to help lower the odds you'll end up with an ingrown situation.

Here are some helpful tips:

**1. Always use some kind of lubrication before you shave.** Shaving dry hair can create especially sharp edges that are more prone to growing back into your skin. The Mayo Clinic recommends always letting a shaving cream or gel soak into your skin for a few minutes to soften the hair. You can also try using a warm compress before you shave.

**2. Use a sharp razor.** With a dull razor, you'll likely have to go over the skin multiple times, raising your risk of cutting yourself and getting an infection. Your razor will typically feel less effective after a few uses, in which case it's time to toss it or swap out the blades.

**3. Shave in the direction that your hair is growing.** Going against your hair's grain may allow for a closer shave, but the closer the shave, the easier it is for your hair to curl back into your skin, Dr. Goldenberg says.

**4. Rinse your blade after every stroke.** This not only adds lubrication, it also gets rid of any shavings clogging the blades that might make it harder to efficiently remove hair with the first pass.

**5. Don't tweeze:** It can be tempting to reach for the tweezers when you spot a stray pubic hair on your bikini line, but take a pass. This can leave a fragment of hair under the skin surface and cause inflammation.

**6. Don't yank your skin for a closer shave:** Stretching your skin tight during shaving can allow the tips of the remaining hair to shrink back into your skin and grow there, the Mayo Clinic explains.

**7. Consider using an electric razor or clipper.** Since the entire point of standard manual razors is to get a really close shave, they're not ideal if you have a history with ingrowns, Samantha B. Conrad, M.D., clinical practice director at Northwestern Memorial Hospital Group, Department of Dermatology, tells SELF. Instead, it might make more sense to use an electric razor or clipper on a setting that gives you a good shave, but not the absolute closest one possible.

**8. Moisturize after you shave.** Moisturizing helps keep your skin less prone to dryness and irritation, and can sometimes aid with exfoliation to prevent a buildup of dead skin on top of a follicle, which increases the odds the hair will get trapped, Dr. Conrad explains. Moisturizers that contain a chemical exfoliant like lactic, glycolic, or salicylic acid can help dissolve dead skin cells that can more easily trap ingrowns, Dr. Conrad says.

Keep in mind that the skin in this area can be delicate and sensitive, so it might make sense to try the gentlest possible moisturizer first before graduating to anything meant to exfoliate.

**9. Trim what you can instead of full-on removing the hair.** When you trim, the hair remains long enough that it doesn't have as much of a chance of growing back into your skin, Dr. Conrad says.

**10. Think about waxing instead of shaving.** Since you're not shaving the hair, waxing doesn't result in those extra-sharp tips that are more likely to curl back into your skin. However, ingrowns are still possible with waxing as the hair grows back, so you shouldn't completely ignore the applicable items on this list, like keeping the area moisturized post-hair removal.

Here's more about what you can expect from the waxing experience, plus how to achieve a great wax at home. If you're really prone to ingrowns, even with waxing, you may want to seek out a product specifically formulated to help. That brings us to...

**11. Try out a serum meant to prevent ingrown hairs.** There are a bunch of serums on the market that promise to help prevent ingrown hairs from forming. Though these products don't necessarily have Serious Scientific Research to back them up, they may contain certain ingredients that could help. Many ingrown hair serums have chemical exfoliants like salicylic acid to slough off dead skin cells so hair can grow out normally, Dr. Goldenberg says. Some also have soothing ingredients like aloe to help prevent irritation and antibacterial ingredients like tea tree oil to possibly help reduce your risk of infection, Dr. Goldenberg says.

**12. Or try removing your hair with a cream, instead.** Like waxing, hair removal creams don't cut the hair. Instead, they dissolve the hair shaft. Without that structural integrity, the hair doesn't stay rooted in your skin, so out it comes. These creams can cause irritation or allergic reactions, the Cleveland Clinic warns, so patch test any new product on part of your body first before going all in. And make sure to read the packaging—many hair

removal creams are *only* formulated for the bikini line, so if you're looking to remove most of your pubic hair, you might not be able to go bare with this.

**13. Consider laser hair removal if you really struggle with ingrowns.** This procedure removes hair at a deeper level and helps keep it from growing back over time, Dr. Conrad says. But it's a misconception that laser hair removal means you'll just never grow hair in the treated spots again. The results vary widely but the hair might grow back—it might just be lighter and finer than before, the Mayo Clinic says.

Like any other medical procedure, laser hair removal can come with some risks, such as skin irritation and pigmentation changes, according to the Mayo Clinic. The procedure also can be trickier in people with dark skin or those with gray, red, blonde, or white hair. So, if you're interested, have a doctor really walk you through just how effective this might be for you.

## **If you do happen to get some painful ingrown hairs around your vulva, take quick action to calm the inflammation and irritation.**

First, the Mayo Clinic recommends that you stop shaving, tweezing, or waxing until things clear up. Any bumps, irritation, pain, and other symptoms should be gone before you carry on with hair removal. In general, this could take anywhere from one to six months. In the meantime, don't scratch the area—this can lead to more irritation and possibly a bacterial infection, Dr. Goldenberg says.

To help things along, you can wash the area around your ingrown hair with a clean washcloth or soft-bristled toothbrush, moving in a circular motion for several minutes, the Mayo Clinic says. This motion gently exfoliates the area without traumatizing it, Dr. Conrad says.

You can also apply an over-the-counter exfoliating lotion or cream with an agent like salicylic acid to try to speed up the healing, Dr. Conrad says, since this helps quicken your cell turnover to release the trapped hair. (Or, if you have an ingrown hair serum with a chemical exfoliant, you can try that instead.) If that's not working, your doctor should be able to prescribe treatments like a topical retinoid (a strong chemical exfoliant that helps clear dead skin cells), a steroid cream to reduce inflammation, or something like an antibiotic ointment or oral antibiotics if you developed an infection from scratching your ingrown, according to the Mayo Clinic.

Finally, as tempting as it may be, don't try to fish the ingrown out on your own. "I would not recommend doing this," Dr. Goldenberg says. Poking and prodding an ingrown may release some fluid trapped inside of it, but the hair might still be stuck in there, he explains, so your symptoms can persist. Plus, opening up your skin in this way can expose you to a potential infection.

Is it theoretically possible for you to squeeze out an ingrown hair with no ill effects? Sure. But, according to the Mayo Clinic, doing so properly—as in, with the least risk of infection or other complications—would require sterilizing a needle, delicately fitting it underneath the hoop of hair, and lifting out the embedded end. Oh, and you'd have to do it all without piercing yourself or otherwise making the situation worse. Sounds much more up a dermatologist's alley, don't you think?