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How Bad Is It Really to Remove an Ingrown Hair Yourself?

Back away from the tweezers.



Ingrown hairs have a lot in common with pimples. They show up uninvited, seemingly with the sole purpose of annoying the crap out of you. And, since they're *right there*, you might be tempted to take matters into your own hands and try to pop them. While you can do that pretty safely with some pimples, what's the deal with removing an ingrown hair yourself? Here's how bad it actually is to try to get that sucker out on your own.

In a cruel, ironic twist, ingrown hairs usually happen when you try to remove body hair.

Your hair grows out of little pockets called follicles, the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD) explains. An ingrown hair starts growing in its follicle normally, but after emerging into the world, it doubles back and re-enters your skin instead of continuing its outward journey. There, it can become embedded. You might be able to see it as a tiny loop with both ends stuck in your skin. Even if you can't pick up on that visual, the resulting inflammation can cause noticeable symptoms like a solid or pus-filled bump, pain, itching, and hyperpigmentation, according to the Mayo Clinic.

So...is it OK to try to fish out an ingrown hair on your own?

Sorry, but you shouldn't try tweezing or squeezing your ingrown hair into submission. "[Self-removal] of ingrown hairs can cause several problems, including infection and scarring," Gary Goldenberg, M.D., assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital, tells SELF. Turns out it takes a lot to do this with minimal risk of skin damage or infection, which is why it's better left to the derms.

If you can actually see the hair loop above your skin, you could *theoretically* take a sterile needle, insert it under the loop, and try to gently lift out the embedded tips of hair, the Mayo Clinic explains. But this is one of those ideas that's better left to theory than practice, because you would need to sterilize a needle on your own, try to find the little hair hoop, then get to work without impaling yourself in the process. That can be pretty challenging, especially if you happen to have an ingrown someplace that might be tricky to access, like around your vulva.

On the bright side, ingrown hairs usually go away by themselves. Sometimes it only takes around a month, according to the Mayo Clinic. (Although it sometimes takes up to six months for hairs that are really stuck in there. Sorry to be a downer.) If an ingrown hair is really giving you grief with symptoms like pain and irritation, see your doctor. They have safe, set procedures for getting stubborn ingrowns out, Cynthia Bailey, M.D., a diplomate of the American Board of Dermatology and president and CEO of Advanced Skin Care and Dermatology Inc., tells SELF.

First, your doctor will disinfect your skin with rubbing alcohol to try to prevent an infection, Dr. Bailey says. Next up? They might use that method the Mayo Clinic laid out of inserting a sterile needle underneath a visible hair loop to free the strand. If the hair loop isn't visible, they have other options. "I use a sterile needle to [pierce] the overlying skin and splinter forceps to help the hair reach the skin surface," Dr. Bailey says. "If the hair is still attached to the base of the follicle, I leave it so that the follicle can heal." But if the hair isn't still attached, your doctor can remove it "much like removing a splinter," she says.

Even though you shouldn't attempt to dig out your own ingrown, you can try to speed up how quickly it liberates itself from your skin.

If you have an ingrown, the Mayo Clinic recommends that you stop shaving, tweezing, or waxing that area until it gets better. But if you're prone to ingrowns, not into giving up hair removal, and can afford it, laser hair removal may be a good alternative for you. It harms your hair follicles on a deeper level so that they don't work as well, cutting back on your body hair, but it's not foolproof. The hair can still grow back, although it will likely be lighter and not as dense as before.

So, how do you heal more quickly and get back to your life? If your ingrown hair doesn't seem to be infected (so the area isn't red, getting more painful, or emitting discharge), there are a few things you can do to move the healing process along. First, Dr. Goldenberg recommends applying a warm compress to the area, as the heat can soften and relax your skin cells. Then, very gently exfoliate the skin trapping the hair. This helps remove dead skin cells so the

hair is more likely to emerge, Dr. Goldenberg says. To do this, the Mayo Clinic recommends moving a washcloth or clean, soft-bristled toothbrush over the area in a circular motion for several minutes.

You can also use an over-the-counter lotion or cream with a chemical exfoliant like salicylic acid, which speeds up skin cell turnover, Samantha B. Conrad, M.D., clinical practice director at Northwestern Memorial Hospital Group's department of dermatology, tells SELF. This can help get rid of dead skin cells that would keep the ingrown hair submerged for a longer period of time. If that's not doing the trick, your dermatologist can offer stronger variations on the theme, including retinoids, which are powerful chemical exfoliants that can help clear out dead skin cells, along with drugs like steroid creams to reduce inflammation, the Mayo Clinic says. If it does look like you're dealing with an infected ingrown hair, you should be taking a trip to your dermatologist anyway, Dr. Conrad says. They might offer you antibiotics to treat that brewing infection and offer guidance on how to prevent scarring.

Yeah, you could roll the dice here and maybe be just fine tackling this on your own—or maybe you could make things a whole lot worse.

If your ingrown hair is overstaying its (non-existent) welcome, your best bet is to see your doctor or just leave it up to the sands of time.