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Here's What to Know Before You Attempt Ingrown Hair Removal Yourself

If you're not careful, things can get even more irritating.

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Shot of an attractive young woman shaving her legs in the bathroom at home PeopleImages via Getty Images

If you remove your body hair, ingrown hairs can be a super annoying part of the experience, so we're not surprised if you've been tempted to take ingrown-hair removal into your own hands.

The pesky, painful bumps form when hair gets trapped under the surface of the skin, causing a little bubble of inflammation. Removing an ingrown hair seems like a pretty minor problem to deal with—one of those things you know you *probably* shouldn't be doing but the risks feel low enough that you're willing to take them. (Kind of like popping a pimple on your own.)

We have a hunch that you're here because you're wondering if it's no big deal to attempt ingrown-hair removal yourself. Here's what you should know about getting rid of one safely, as well as how to prevent them from showing up in the first place.

What causes ingrown hairs? | How long do ingrown hairs last? | Can you remove an ingrown hair yourself? | When should you see a doctor? | How to treat an infected ingrown hair | How to prevent ingrown hairs

First, what causes ingrown hairs?

Your hair grows out of little pockets called follicles, according to the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD). An ingrown hair starts growing in its follicle normally, but after emerging into the world, it doubles back and reenters your skin. "Sometimes a buildup of dead skin cells and other debris causes pores to clog, forcing the hair to curl inwards as it cannot penetrate the surface layer of the skin," board-certified dermatologist Marie Hayag, MD, founder of 5th Avenue Aesthetics and assistant clinical professor at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City, tells SELF. Compared to other hair-removal methods, this happens most often when you're shaving. "The razor leaves the end of the hair sharp, making it more likely to pierce back into the skin," Dr. Hayag says.

You might be able to see an ingrown hair as a tiny loop with both ends stuck in your skin. But even if you can't see the hair itself, you'll likely notice the resulting inflammation, which can cause symptoms like a solid or pus-filled bump, pain or tenderness, itching, and hyperpigmentation, according to the Mayo Clinic.

It's common to see ingrown hairs pop up wherever you wax, shave, or groom with tweezers, including your face, legs, bikini area, and underarms. "This is likely due to the hair being typically coarser and tightly curled in these areas (especially the pubic area), which allows it to grow back into the skin instead of outward," Atlanta-based board-certified dermatologist Tiffany Clay, MD, tells SELF.

How long do ingrown hairs last?

Ingrown hairs frequently go away on their own without any specific treatment. There's a chance an ingrown hair could heal on its own in as quickly as a week or two, Dr. Hayag says, but it may take longer if it gets infected. Sometimes it takes around a month, according to the Mayo Clinic, but it can take up to six months for hairs that are really stuck in there. (Sorry to be a downer.) If you have pain, the bump gets bigger, and/or you notice other signs of infection (see below) and your symptoms don't get better in a few days, you'll want to get that sucker out.

Can you remove an ingrown hair yourself?

Trying to remove an ingrown hair yourself may seem like a minor thing, but it can cause some major problems if done incorrectly, including infection and scarring, **Gary Goldenberg, MD**, assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City, tells SELF.

If you can actually see the hair loop *above* your skin—meaning the hair is poking out of the bump—that's the only time you should attempt to do an ingrown-hair removal at home. "If you can't see the hair, don't go digging for it,

because it could be another type of inflammatory cyst—like a pimple—that doesn’t actually have a hair. Either way, if you go picking, popping, or digging, you could cause an infection, scarring, or further irritation,” Dr. Clay points out.

Here’s how to remove an ingrown hair, according to the derms we talked to:

First, avoid hair removal procedures in the area.

If you have an ingrown hair, the Mayo Clinic recommends that you stop shaving, tweezing, or waxing that area until the ingrown hair is removed or goes away on its own—otherwise, you risk irritating it further and delaying the healing process, Dr. Goldenberg says.

Apply a warm compress to soothe the skin.

Applying a warm compress to the area can calm any inflammation and itchiness, as well as soften the top layer of your skin, making it easier for the ingrown hair to break free, Dr. Goldenberg explains.

Exfoliate very gently to encourage the hair to come out.

After applying the warm compress, you can very gently exfoliate the skin that’s 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 gently rubbing a clean washcloth over the area in a circular motion for a few minutes.

You can also use an over-the-counter lotion, serum, or wash with a chemical exfoliant like salicylic acid or glycolic acid, which clear pores and speed up skin cell turnover, Samantha B. Conrad, MD, clinical practice director at Northwestern Medicine’s dermatology department, tells SELF. This helps get rid of dead skin cells that can keep the ingrown hair trapped for longer.

Products to try:

- Paula’s Choice Weightless Body Treatment 2% BHA, \$28, Sephora
- Fur Ingrown Eliminator Serum, \$36, Ulta
- Bushbalm Piña Colada Exfoliating Scrub, \$23, Bush Balm

If you can see the hair, try to remove it with clean tweezers.

Using the narrow tip of a clean pair of tweezers (you should rinse it with alcohol or use an alcohol wipe) tease the ingrown hair out of the follicle. If the hair becomes invisible or if you can’t get it out without too much poking or bleeding, stop and give a dermatologist’s office a call.

Consider using gentle, hydrating products to help your skin heal.

If you manage to get the hair out, gentle products containing anti-inflammatory ingredients like aloe, tea tree oil, or colloidal oatmeal can also help calm your skin while it heals, Dr. Hayag adds. Another tip: Select moisturizing and soothing products that have “non-comedogenic” on the label to avoid ingredients that may clog your pores and cause further inflammation.

Products to try:

- Aveeno Eczema Therapy Daily Moisturizing Cream, \$13, Target
- La Roche-Posay Lipikar Eczema Soothing Relief Cream, \$16, Target
- Skinfix Barrier+ Lipid-Boost Body Cream, \$48, Sephora

When should you see a doctor to get rid of an ingrown hair?

If an ingrown hair is really giving you grief with symptoms like pain and irritation, you'll also want to make an appointment with a dermatologist if you're able. "A dermatologist can carefully extract ingrown hairs (after numbing you) and make sure the area is not infected," Dr. Hayag says.

First, your doctor will disinfect your skin with rubbing alcohol to try to prevent an infection, board-certified dermatologist Cynthia Bailey, MD, a diplomate of the American Board of Dermatology and CEO of Advanced Skin Care and Dermatology Inc., tells SELF. Next, they might insert a sterile needle underneath a visible hair loop to free the strand.

If the hair loop isn't visible, though, 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.

What's the best way to treat an infected ingrown hair?

As we mentioned, ingrown hairs can get infected and become even peskier than they already are. This happens when bacteria from the skin's surface get into the follicle; it could be from an accidental tear in the skin or from poking at an ingrown hair with unclean hands or tweezers, Dr. Clay explains. An infected ingrown hair will likely be painful, red, swollen, and may have a yellowish green fluid draining from it, she adds.

Depending on the severity of the infection, it might still clear up on its own. To speed along the healing process at home, you can cleanse the area with gentle soap and water and apply a warm compress for 10 to 15 minutes, three times per day, Dr. Clay says.

But if you have any questions about how to deal with the infection, or if it's already been around for a few days with no sign of improvement (or it seems to be getting worse quickly), you should definitely call your primary care doctor or a dermatologist. (And don't pick or squeeze the bump while you wait for your appointment! The infection can spread that way, according to Dr. Hayag.) They'll likely give you topical or oral antibiotics to treat that brewing infection, as well as offer guidance on how to prevent scarring. If the area is very inflamed and tender, your doctor may also inject a steroid into the skin, in order to reduce inflammation and provide quick relief.

How to prevent ingrown hairs

As important as it is to get rid of an ingrown hair, it's also crucial to start thinking about how to prevent the next one from cropping up.

For instance, if you shave your legs or other body hair in the shower (or bath), aim to shave toward the end of the shower so that the hair is softer and less likely to curve into your skin, Dr. Clay suggests. Make sure you always use some sort of lubrication (like a shaving cream or gel) too, which also softens hair and prevents irritation. Both of these steps also minimize the need to pass over the hair more than once, which is key because every time you swipe, you increase the chances of developing an ingrown hair, as SELF reported previously.

Waxing and sugaring are less likely to cause ingrown hairs than shaving, but regularly exfoliating is still important with those hair-removal methods (as it is with shaving) in order to prevent dead skin cells from trapping hairs. If over-the-counter exfoliators aren't doing the trick, though, you can ask your dermatologist about stronger exfoliating treatments for ingrown hairs, including retinoids, which are powerful compounds that can help clear out

dead skin cells. If you have particularly angry bumps, your doctor may also suggest a steroid cream to reduce inflammation, the Mayo Clinic says.

If you're someone who finds yourself getting ingrown hairs frequently, it may be worth considering a single-blade razor (we like the *Oui the People* Rose Gold Sensitive Skin Razor, \$75, *Oui the People*). You can also try an electric trimmer (we're big fans of the *Fur Body* Timmer, \$90, *Fur*) that's not on the closest shave setting—that way, you won't cut the hair too close to your skin, reducing the chances of it curling back into the skin.

And if you can afford it (and deal with the moderate pain), laser hair removal is perhaps the best option for the ingrown-prone. It's not foolproof—the hair can still grow back—but it prevents your hair follicles from working properly, cutting back on your body hair and, therefore, annoying ingrown hairs.