

Locking in That Shaven (or Unshaven) Look

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THE two-day beard is a modern classic. Both virile and casual, it bespeaks a man who needn't bother to shave every day.

And it's also a lot of work.

The truth is, most men who sport sexy, two-day growths end up spending more, not less, time in front of the mirror. That's because facial hair has a way of meandering in unruly patches down the neck or up too high on the cheeks. If the look you're aiming for is George Clooney relaxing at his Italian villa - rather than, say, Jack Nicholson on a murderous rampage in "The Shining" - you end up needing to trim around the edges. And that means wielding a razor very, very carefully.



I love the look of going a few days without shaving," said Charles Christian, 26, a part-time hair stylist and fashion designer who is a student at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. "But my beard hair was growing into my chest hair, and I'm really not into that."

Kevin Hillaire, 29, a case manager for the New York City Department of Correction, likes the stubbly look, too. But the scraggly patches on his neck, dotted with ingrown hairs, ruined the picture.

Ramin Talaie for The New York Times

Laser beard sculpturing helped Charles Christian manage facial hair.



Michael Falco for The New York Times

Christopher Marino underwent laser beard sculpturing.

Hillaire and a small but growing rank of other men are sporting neatly trimmed two- and three-day growth without extra grooming. A technique called laser beard sculpturing has helped them do away with unwanted areas of facial hair for good.

Lasers have been used for years to zap away unwanted hair. For men the most common target has been those simian patches on the back. But now, due in part to improved laser technologies and men's greater willingness to explore cosmetic fixes, lasers are increasingly being used to create neatly edged beard lines.

The majority of men who seek laser beard sculpturing want to get rid of the facial hairs on the throat area. But more are asking to define a line along the upper margins of the beard, as well, said Dr. David Colbert, a cosmetic dermatologist in Manhattan.

"Basically we didn't want to get too stylistic about it," said Mr. Christian, a patient of Dr. Colbert's. "So he created a natural beard line and sort of rounded it around the sides to give it a soft and natural look. It's fabulous. I look younger, and my jaw line looks much stronger. I can go without shaving for three or four days and not look scruffy."

Not everyone who seeks out laser beard treatments wants the unshaven look. Some merely want to manage heavy facial hair. "I'm Italian, and I have a dark, rough beard," said Christopher Marino, 40, director of sales for a New York telecommunications company who has had laser beard sculpturing. "For me 5 o'clock shadow arrives around 11 o'clock in the morning."

Like many men with very heavy beards, Mr. Marino had a rough time shaving on his neck, where hairs tend to grow every which way. "I was always getting razor burns and nicks and cuts on my neck," he said. "And believe me, the last thing you want to do is get blood all over a \$250 Ermenegildo Zegna shirt."

Mr. Marino no longer frets about looking ill-shaven or spoiling expensive dress shirts. He turned to Dr. Bradford Katchen, a New York dermatologist, who used a laser to eliminate the neck hairs, leaving a permanently manicured beard line that allows him to look well-groomed even when his 5 o'clock shadow shows up.

Laser hair removal is most effective for men with light complexions and dark hair. Blonde hair is more difficult to zap away because there is less pigment to absorb the laser's energy. Improved lasers have made it easier to remove hair on dark-skinned men without causing uneven skin coloration.

Mr. Hillaire, who described his skin color as caramel, consulted Dr. Colbert. After a few sessions under the laser, the troublesome hairs on his neck were gone. Now, he said, he can go three days without shaving and still look businesslike, and he no longer worries about ingrown hairs.

Each laser treatment, lasting anywhere from a few minutes to an hour, costs \$150 to \$350. To be effective, it must be repeated four to six times, spaced three to four weeks apart. "Hair normally cycles through periods of rest and growth, and the laser works only on hairs in the growth phase," Dr. Katchen explained.

Some follicles recover and begin producing hair again, requiring periodic touch-ups, usually after a year or two. "Beard hair growth is driven by testosterone, so if you get someone with a lot of testosterone and a very thick beard, it may require more treatments and more frequent touch-ups," Dr. Colbert said.

The procedure can cause mild discomfort, especially on the skin of the face and neck, but sensitivity varies. Mr. Marino said it felt like "a really hard pinch," while Mr. Hillaire said that it felt a little warm.

Dr. Colbert said lasers also can be used to randomly weed out hairs across a particularly thick area of facial hair, minimizing 5 o'clock shadow. But Dr. Katchen warned that because the laser is imprecise, the result can be patchy. He added, "If too much hair is removed, you can end up feminizing the face, which is one thing most guys definitely don't want."

Dr. Colbert has his patients come in with a beard and shave in the office, to show their preferred beard line. Some bring in photographs of actors or models they'd like to look like. "The funny thing is," Dr. Colbert said, "though I'm not going to name names, a lot of those actors and models look the way they do because they've had laser beard treatments."