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Everything You Wanted to Know About Laser Hair Removal

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Let's get this out of the way: By no means should women feel [societal pressure](#) to become smooth, shiny hairless cats. But after a dizzying number of summertime waxing appointments, I decided it was time to permanently expunge hair from various parts of my body. When I start researching laser hair-removal options, I felt overwhelmed and confused. I ended up obsessing over laser hair removal for months — asking friends and friends of friends and friends' doctor parents for intel, going on consultation visits, and deep-diving on Google. These are the straightforward questions and answers I wish I had before starting the process.

Which hair colors can be treated?

Despite what some shady providers will tell you, laser hair removal really only works on dark hair. "The technology is one that does require dark hair because the laser works by targeting the pigment of the hair follicle," says Robert Anolik, a Goop-recommended dermatologist who works for the [Laser & Skin Surgery Center of New York](#). "If somebody has white or blonde or red hair or gray hair, it's not going to work. Don't be fooled."

What about skin tones?

All skin tones can be treated, but to varying amounts of success, depending upon the machine used. Andréa Young, the founder of [Beam Laser Spa](#) in New York, uses Candela's GentleMax Pro, a machine with two wavelengths. "One is the Alexandrite, which is for Caucasian clients, and the other is Yag, which can treat anybody of any skin tone," says Young.

Anolik says, "The Yag laser wavelength is longer, and longer wavelengths will go deeper into the skin and bypass its impact at the surface skin a little more. We protect the skin by cooling its surface as we do it. That protects the pigment of the skin surface and allows the laser to travel more deeply, and the cooling protects the surface to make it safer."

That said, the unfortunate truth is that the combination of fair skin and dark hair reacts best and fastest to laser hair removal. If you have darker skin, the process might take longer and ultimately cost more. "I do find that it's going to take, on average, more sessions than it would take if I was treating fair skin because I want to make sure that the skin's surface will not be affected in terms of pigmentation," Anolik says. Dr. Joshua Zeichner, director of Cosmetic & Clinical Research in Dermatology at Mount Sinai Hospital, agrees. "The very darkest skin individual still aren't great candidates. If we use lower-energy laser levels, it make take more sessions."

What can you expect to pay?

The New York Dermatology Group, an upscale doctor's office, [charges](#) \$200 per underarm treatment (\$1,020 for six sessions), \$350 for the basic bikini area (\$1,785 for six), and \$600 for Brazilian (\$3,060 for six). Anolik's rates are similar: \$300 to \$450 per individual armpit treatment, \$400 to \$500 for bikini, and \$600 to \$900 for Brazilian.

Beam recently ran a [Gilt City deal](#) that listed \$289 for three underarm or bikini sessions and \$505 for three Brazilian sessions. [Satori](#), a laser-spa chain, charges \$50 for a single underarm session, \$60 for bikini line, and \$129 for Brazilian.

As you can tell, the variation is huge, and laser spas are considerably less expensive. But to make things more complicated, regulations on who can practice laser hair removal vary state to state. In New Jersey, it can only be performed by a physician; in New York, this isn't the case. There are also [at-home laser options](#), which work to varying success.

What about coupon deals?

Go on a consultation first. "If you're seeing a board-certified dermatologist, and that's the field that developed this technology, it's likely it'll be a more expensive treatment, but likely you'll see a greater and faster rate of success," Anolik says. "The frustration I have as a dermatologist is I see complications come from chain companies or spa environments. People come in with pigmentation abnormalities, blistering, and scarring. I'm not saying that's going to happen. It's just the chances of things like that happening are higher when people are being treated outside of the expert level."

But he also acknowledges that paying the big bucks for a dermatologist only offers a degree of protection: "That can happen even when treated by an expert." For what it's worth, I had a good experience at Beam, and while Young is not a doctor, she worked in molecular biology before getting her MBA and opening her business. She felt qualified to practice after taking New York's state-required 40-hour laser hair-removal course and shadowing at another business. She notes that many of her clients are actually physicians themselves.

How many sessions does it take to remove hair?

You'll need at least six, but this is where it can get hard to predict how much you're going to spend and when it can feel like a practitioner's trying to upsell you. "We tell prospective clients it could take between 6 to 12 sessions to have a 75 percent hair reduction," Young says. "Many are beyond thrilled at that point. They may pop in once a year for a maintenance session, but they don't mind running a [razor](#) on those areas every couple of months or so. The 25 percent that don't get killed completely become much, much weaker, which translates into much finer hair and slow-growing hair." Compared to shaving or waxing, it's a breeze to remove hair at this point.

"I typically start with a series of six to eight treatments," agrees Jessica Weiser, who works for the New York Dermatology Group. "It is important to note that dark coarse hair will generally respond more quickly than fine hair." She also notes that patients with hormonal conditions, such as polycystic ovarian syndrome, have a higher risk of hair regrowth.

Is it painful?

I found my laser hair-removal treatments to be painful but not unbearable, and less painful than [waxing](#). Beam gave me a stress ball, and I definitely squeamed it as hard as possible, but it was over and I could be the discomfited after a few minutes of icing, I felt fine and ready to head home. My skin stayed pinkish-red (but not sensitive to touch) for the next 24 hours, and Young instructed me to not exercise, have sex, or do anything else to generate bodily heat. Medical practices routinely administer numbing cream, but you could also try [Reiki therapy](#), which makes the process practically painless.

Are there any areas you should avoid?

"A lot of times women come in and they have a little bit of facial hair," Young says. "That's normal. All women do, of every age." (Perhaps this is why [this Japanese facial razor](#) is popular on Amazon.) "Facial hair, for some reason, is one of the most challenging areas to be successful with laser," she continues. "It's very much under hormonal control and as all of us age, our hormones are always going to be in flux."

What are the risks?

It is very possible for a laser to scar you. "One thing that may happen is transient discoloration, where people with very reactive skin can have areas that turn slightly different colors," Young says. "It will either be a circle shape or a half-moon shape. The color of the discoloration can be white or red or brown. And this can happen, mind you, even if all settings are absolutely correct. It doesn't necessarily mean that something was done incorrectly. Some people are just kind of prone to that. I'm actually a good example."

"Around laser hair removal often will cause mild redness and swelling around the hair follicles that will resolve within hours after treatment," says Weiser. "Laser hair removal has many potential risks, including no response to treatment; thinning, lightening, or even graying of treated hair without full removal; damage to eyes from improper eye protection; burns or blisters; skin discoloration; and scarring, among others."

The other complication that exists is called [paradoxical hypertrichosis](#).

"That's the process where the hair, instead of diminishing in concentration and fullness, actually gets thicker and longer," Anolik says. (Yikes.) "I've spoken to colleagues, and we've theorized that's more likely to happen when you're getting treated with a very low energy. That is more likely to happen in a spa environment, where they might worry they can cause a complication, so they put it on a very low setting."

Where's the technology headed?

The good news is that the demand for laser hair removal is ushering in technological advancements — hopefully soon making this treatment accessible to people with different hair colors.

"Interestingly, microwave technology (Miradry) used for sweat reduction in the underarms, has shown some potential for removal of light such as red, strawberry, and blonde," Weiser says. "If this technology could be harnessed and used comfortably, we could significantly expand our laser hair-removal market to improve treatment options for this patient population." This is also helpful for anyone (everyone) with "peach fuzz" on their cheeks.

The upshot of all of this: It's a long and expensive road to become Mr. Bigglesworth. Is it worth it? I'd say yes.