

'Whether ... or not?' Our on-and-off affair with pubic hair

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BACKGROUND

'The bush', 'bird's nest', 'lady garden', 'briar patch in which a small mouse nestles'. The issue of pubic hair is surely of interest to Journal readers, even if only because in current society we are among the people most likely to have a balanced view. Unlike the vast majority of the population uninvolved in sexual and reproductive health care, we may witness pubic hair – or its absence – on a daily basis. Hence this Consumer Correspondent article, addressing the what, the why – and, above all, the 'whether ... or not' – of the topic.

DEFINITION AND JUSTIFICATION

Let's begin with the basic 'what'. Human genital hair develops in response to the hormones of puberty; compared to head hair it's heavier, longer, coarser, often shorter and curlier (hence the popular term, 'bush'). Left to grow naturally, in men it tends to taper in a thin, upward-pointing triangle, in women a thicker shape widening over the mons pubis.

But 'why' is it there at all? Explanations vary, and even the most informed are less than completely verifiable. Social modesty evolved long after genetic imperatives, so pubic hair probably did not develop to avoid embarrassment. It may well have developed to discourage debris from entering the body, though of course the hair itself can harbour dirt as well as guard against it. Desmond Morris quotes early anthropological reports of an island in the South Pacific where women used their luxuriant pubic locks as a hand towel.

Genital hair could be a heat-retaining device, but if that were so then surely women would have hairy abdomens to keep ovaries and womb warm and men, heaven forbid, would have hair-covered penises. It could be a protection in battle, but conversely it could offer adversaries something to grasp – a concept entertainingly expressed in the British expression "to get him by the short and curlies",

meaning to have absolute power over someone. It does mark out sexual maturity and so readiness to breed, but since it is many millennia since humans wandered around stark naked, it is surely now surplus to 'love at first sight' strategies.

THE PAST: AMBIVALENCE

Which leads us gracefully on to the role of pubic hair in attraction and seduction. And here we reach the 'whether ... or not'. Do we see pubic hair as good or bad, seductive or repulsive? Should we celebrate it? Or should we obliterate it?

Historically, the answer to this question is inconsistent. Ancient Rome, Greece and the Middle East usually opted for the removal of all body hair except the eyebrows and head hair; Islamic tradition advises that pubic hair be removed every 40 days. Art from ancient Egypt shows women's genital hair in place but trimmed. Michelangelo showed women entirely hairless, while men's genital hair was depicted. Yet elsewhere in Europe all body hair was shown *in situ* up to Elizabethan times.

The invention of the safety razor in the 18th century helped support the fashion for bare genitals. The artist and critic John Ruskin was allegedly unable to consummate his marriage so appalled was he at his bride's unshaven state. Yet there was still incongruence; in inhibited Victorian Britain lovers exchanged pubic hair, and some gentlemen wore their ladies' curls as a cockade in their hats.

With the 20th century's social and sexual revolution came a belief in individual bodily freedom, such that by the late 1960s dense pubic hair was seen as a statement of self-confidence while depilation was deemed both old-fashioned and a sign of erotic repression. The first edition of *The Joy of Sex* (1972), for example, depicts flowing genital tresses, male and female, describing them as a 'resource' to be twirled round a lover's fingers, decorated with ribbons and flowers, and tugged gently during orgasm.



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THE PRESENT: DISTASTE

In the 21st century, 'bare' has once again become the look of choice in many cultures. The fashion for female grooming in particular has resulted in a wide variety of decorative 'designs', from the 'landing strip' (all hair removed bar a narrow vertical line), to the 'Brazilian' (all hair removed completely) and the 'vajazzle' (all hair removed then sequins applied to the mons pubis.) As to *The Joy of Sex*, when it came to the illustrations for my 2008 rewrite, the publishers opted for a male model with trimmed yet noticeable foliage, but a female model who had what I believe is known by some as a 'postage stamp'.

What caused the shift? Again, the answer is unclear. It could be, as many claim, the 'Sex in the City' episode where Carrie mistakenly opted for a 'Brazilian'. It could also be that with ever-tinier swimwear, the need for depilation has become ever greater. Perhaps the increasing ease of hair removal has made the difference; beauty salons, armed with the latest electronic and laser weapons, now offer – for the first time – permanent pubic nudity.

More seriously, the rise of hair removal is surely linked to the rise of sexual freedom. Given more sexual partners, everyone wants to be sure not only that their newly-met love is mite-free, but also that they can offer their new love assurances of their own hygiene status – not to mention being able to give and receive oral sex unhindered.

The reasons for approving naked genitals could also be more to do with pornography than practicality, though the two are linked; shaven pubes are standard in porn images for the very practical reason that they allow viewers to see more, and more clearly. With the increasingly availability of porn, the result is that shaven has come to be seen as the norm; sadly almost every teenage lad worldwide may at some point have shared Ruskin's alleged belief that hairy female genitalia are an aberration. Conversely, pubic hair itself has come to be seen as unacceptable; in 2013 Instagram controversially deleted a user's account after she posted a self-portrait clearly showing a straggly bikini line.

THE FUTURE: A RETHINK?

That said, we may be on the verge of a revolution, or at least a rethink. The word from beauticians is of a decrease in customers wanting full 'Brazilians' and 'vajazzling'. Celebrities as high-profile as Gwyneth Paltrow and Lady Gaga have come out in favour of the hairy look, and in Spring 2014, British newspaper *The Daily Mail*, noted for its populist views, headlined "the new vagina trend is natural, big and bushy".

This liking for more luxurious growth may be simply a 'trend'; fashion brand American Apparel's shop window displays of mannequins with merkins certainly doesn't suggest a serious academic

reappraisal. The rethink may simply be caused by the inconvenience and expense of regular depilation; it may be carried out with enthusiasm as an initial lure or during early courtship, but once partners are committed, they are likely to ease off the effort and to relax into being themselves.

And, to relax into accepting themselves. In an age where all genders and generations are under increasing pressure to look as unblemished as possible, to be 'bare' is not only a practical but also a psychological pressure. The ideal of the perfectly hairless body is as unattainable for most of us as the ideal of the perfectly sculpted body; in letting that ideal slide and not depilating, perhaps we are simply embracing ourselves as we are, hairy as nature intended.

Plus, while avid porn viewers may think 'bare' is not only beautiful but normal, perhaps as we get older and wiser we recognise and value more the signs of real-life human sexual maturity. And perhaps we become more wary of taking the cult of youth to extremes: in these days of paedophilia scandals, we may regard hairless genitals as a little too similar to prepubescent ones.

HAIR IS HEALTHY

Finally, there is now a new reason to let hair grow. A 2014 study¹ suggests that hair removal can affect the skin's protective function, making us more vulnerable to infections. Some 60% of study respondents reported health complications as a result of hair removal, particularly the permanent kind.

I have found that my conclusions in this speedy exploration of pubic mysteries are fascinatingly equivocal. Pubic hair is natural, so it surely has a purpose – but it's not entirely clear what that purpose is. Historically, different societies and cultures usually have a distinct preference for either shaven or bare – but there is no consistent logic for such preferences. And while there seems some seductive justification for depilation, thereafter so long as both partners are content, it affects our long-term love not one jot. As for any call to action, it's probably "trim, don't shave", but that's hardly a matter of life or death.

The only firm conclusion I come to is that if trends continue, in the future Journal readers are likely to see more, not less, pubic hair in their practices. But I leave it to you, dear reader, to decide 'whether ... or not' that progression is a good thing.

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REFERENCE

- 1 DeMaria AL, Flores M, Hirth JM, *et al.* Complications related to pubic hair removal. *Am J Obstet Gynecol* 2014;210: 528.e1–528.e5.