

ORIGINAL RESEARCH—BEHAVIOR

Pubic Hair Preferences, Reasons for Removal, and Associated Genital Symptoms: Comparisons Between Men and Women

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. Pubic hair grooming and removal are common behaviors among men and women. However, little is known about the reasons for grooming, preferred pubic hairstyle of sexual partners, and symptoms associated with regular grooming.

Aims. This study aims to assess pubic hair removal/grooming practices, pubic hairstyle preferences, and genital outcomes associated with pubic hair removal among men and women in a college sample.

Methods. Data were gathered from 1,110 participants (671 women and 439 men) at a large public Midwestern university and a small Southern public university.

Main Outcome Measures. Items assessed demographics, pubic hair grooming and removal practices in the past 4 weeks, reasons for pubic hair status, preference for pubic hairstyle of sexual partners, and symptoms associated with removal and grooming.

Results. Most (95%) participants had removed their pubic hair on at least one occasion in the past 4 weeks with shaving being the most commonly reported hair removal technique by women (82%) and men (49%). Women were significantly more likely to report their typical status as hair-free (50% vs. 19%; $\chi^2 = 165.528$, $P < 0.001$) and men were significantly more likely to prefer a hair-free sexual partner (60% vs. 24%; $\chi^2 = 211.712$, $P < 0.001$). Genital itching was experienced on at least one occasion by 80.3% of pubic hair groomers and was the most commonly reported side effect.

Conclusion. Genital grooming and pubic hair removal are common practices among both men and women of college-age. Women are likely to report stronger associations with feelings of cleanliness, comfort, sex appeal, social norms of their peer group, and affordability as reasons for their chosen pubic hair style. Women also report more experiences with genital side effects of pubic hair removal, an expected result as women are removing pubic hair more frequently and more completely than their male counterparts. **Butler SM, Smith NK, Collazo E, Caltabiano L, and Herbenick D. Pubic hair preferences, reasons for removal, and associated genital symptoms: Comparisons between men and women. J Sex Med 2015;12:48–58.**

Key Words. Pubic Hair; Removal; Genital; Symptoms; Vulva

Introduction

Body hair removal and depilatory practices are associated with cultural norms and gender roles [1–6]. In the United States and other Western cultures, pubic hair grooming and removal are common behaviors among both women and men

[1–10]. Prevalence and frequency of pubic hair removal are associated with being female, younger age, and income [2,7,8,10]. Shaving is the most commonly reported method of pubic hair removal, with far fewer individuals using wax, electrolysis, laser hair reduction, or hair removal cream [7,8,10]. A recent U.S. study conducted among sexually

active women ($n = 2,451$) indicated women under age 30 were more likely to remove all or some of their pubic hair within the last month [8]. Among 18- to 24-year-olds, 21% reported their pubic hair status as typically hair-free, 38% sometimes removed all pubic hair, 29% removed some hair, and 12% did not remove any pubic hair. Studies conducted among convenience samples of Australian and U.S. college students indicated that 76% of women had fully removed their pubic hair on at least one occasion [3] and 75% of men had recently shaved or trimmed the hair around their groin [1]. A study of Australian ($n = 224$) collegiate men and women indicated that women were more likely to remove their pubic hair than men and to do so more often [2]. Despite the common practice of pubic hair alteration, few studies have assessed the prevalence of pubic hair removal and grooming strategies among men, and only one has examined pubic hair preferences for sexual partners [11], even though pubic hair grooming practices appear to be related to sexual behavior [8,9].

The extent to which individuals partake in self-care practices because of sexual partner preferences is not well understood. What little evidence we do have outlines that women are motivated to remove their pubic hair for the following reasons: sexual attractiveness [3,7,12], cleanliness [2,7,12], social normative beliefs [3], sexual enhancement [12], and increased feelings of femininity associated with removal [3]. A study assessing pubic hair grooming and removal practices among men indicated cleanliness was the most common reasons for shaving (75%), followed by sex appeal (69%), and body definition/muscularity (39%) [1]. A similar assessment conducted with women indicated 85% of women reported “*a cleaner look*” as their most common motivation to remove their hair followed by the belief that pubic hair is unattractive (48%) [7]. In addition, women who removed the majority of their pubic hair were more likely to score higher on mean attitudinal assessments of sexual attractiveness, perception of social norms, femininity, and psychological perceptions of self-enhancement [3].

Pubic hair removal also is associated with higher self-reported scores of sexual functioning and response among women [8], and one study found that 32% of men who shaved off their pubic hair reported enhanced sexual experiences [1]. At this time, the relationship between pubic hair and sexual sensation is correlated and cannot be deemed causal in nature—and may likely be due to

the influence of other factors such as younger age or feeling more comfortable with one’s body. Prospective research is needed to shed more light on the nature of sexual pleasure and the presence or absence of pubic hair.

Trends in pubic hairstyle may be readily susceptible to changing patterns in popular culture and fashion or may be closely linked with sexual activity status. Results of one large-scale investigation revealed that 20% of women who had previously removed their pubic hair had discontinued the practice. Reasons for discontinuation included physical side effects (stubble, rash, bumps, and ingrown hairs; 23%), too much of a hassle (20%), and not currently sexually active (7%) [7].

In addition to the need to better understand what motivates pubic hair removal, we also need more information on how pubic hair removal is linked to health outcomes. According to the U.S. National Electronic Injury Surveillance System (NEISS), 335 pubic hair grooming-related genitourinary injuries resulting in emergency department visits occurred between 2002 and 2010. Extrapolating from the data provided by the NEISS, it was estimated that 11,704 (95% confidence interval = 8,430–15,004) emergency room visits occurred nationally during that time period [13]. A recent study assessed the prevalence of lifetime pubic hair removal and grooming-related complications among a sample of 333 women who attended a reproductive health clinic. Results indicated 60% of participants reported a complication with epidermal abrasion as the most prevalent condition (37%), and only 5% experienced an infection. In addition, 18% reported genital cuts, 13% genital rash, and 4% reported visiting a healthcare provider as a result of their complication [10]. A similar clinical investigation assessing viral infections of the pubis among 43 men and 18 women revealed that 10% of patients with high genital lesions reported pubic shaving compared with 3% among nonshavers [14], whereas other scholars have reported case studies that associated negative health outcomes with pubic hair removal [15–17]. Additional research is needed to assess the prevalence of these problems in a nonclinical population, among whom side effects may be less common and less severely experienced.

Aim

The purposes of this study were to assess the pubic hair removal and grooming practices of college students, as well as identify reasons for choosing a

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