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## What Is Laser Hair Removal and How Does It Work

Written by [Kate M. Van Druff](#)  
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Don't we all find the thought of never having to shave our legs again even the least bit enticing? All that time saved, no more nicks or cuts, no more ingrown hairs, razor burn, or panic at realizing we forgot to shave. Many women turn to laser hair removal when they get fed up with shaving or when they realize how much time they can save themselves in the long run. Laser hair removal also treats hair removal on other parts of the body for both women and men, delivering smooth and hair-free results over time.



But, in the long run, is laser hair removal really worth the cost? Is it permanent and effective? Is laser hair removal really a safe hair removal option? Read on to get the inside scoop on laser hair removal and how it works from Daniel N. Ronel, MD, a doctor specializing in laser hair removal.

### Q. What are some permanent hair removal options?

**A. Dr. Ronel:** Although there are many temporary measures that can be used to remove hair (waxing, creams, shaving, plucking), the way to remove hair permanently is to destroy the bulb from which the hair grows. The only two methods are electrolysis and laser therapy. Electrolysis is a tedious, invasive, and painful process that involves inserting a needle into each individual hair follicle and delivering an electrical charge to them one at a time. Electrolysis often requires years of treatments at regular intervals. By delivering light energy to hundreds of hair follicles at a time, laser hair removal effectively treats an area in just seconds that would take over an hour with electrolysis.

Both techniques are not 100% perfect; that is, hair can occasionally grow back. These "regrowths" are easily treated.

### Q. What are the risks, cons, or side effects of laser hair removal? Is it dangerous? Is it painful? Does the pain last after the procedure? Is there scarring?

**A. Dr. Ronel:** There are many different lasers that can be used for hair removal – some are more effective and gentler than others. The new lasers, such as the Cutera ProWave, can cause a mild pinching or stinging sensation. No local anesthesia or pain medication is typically required. Most patients experience few side effects, such as slight reddening and local swelling of the skin, similar to a sunburn. These typically last for several hours or less. In rare instances, blistering may occur. The more experienced the operator, the less likely it is that any side effects will occur, so it is important to check the credentials of the person operating the laser. Improper use can cause darkening of the skin, and even burning and scarring.

### Q. How long does it take for laser hair removal to be most effective? (Hours, days, weeks, months, number of sessions?)

**A. Dr. Ronel:** Effects are seen right away. Laser hair removal targets growing hairs, so the therapy must be repeated as new hairs enter the growth cycle. This is usually every three to four weeks, depending on the individual. Underarms and the bikini line usually requires four sessions, legs typically require four to six sessions. After the sessions are completed, usually a smaller series of three sessions is required yearly, although this varies by the individual.



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**Q. Is the hair gone for good?**

**A. Dr. Ronel:** It is not 100% permanent, but when hair grows back in between sessions, it is usually at half the thickness it was before.

**Q. What does the patient need to do to prepare for this procedure?**

**A. Dr. Ronel:** Shave the area; do not pluck or wax before the treatment (the hair has to be there for the laser to work on it). Dark hair, light skin, and coarse hair are the easiest to treat. People with dark skin may not be ideal candidates, but still benefit from treatment and may require more sessions. Blond, grey, and red hairs are difficult to treat with a laser, and tanned patients must wait until the tan fades before treatment.

People with psoriasis, cystic acne, and dermatitis are not good candidates. Those taking Retin A or Accutane should not be treated, and neither should people who have a pacemaker, who are pregnant, or who have metal screws in the area.

**Additional Notes:**

“Patients spent over \$300 million on more than 780,000 laser hair removal treatments in 2005, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons,” Dr. Ronel adds.

“The new lasers can treat a wide range of skin types, and the large handpiece on the Prowave can quickly treat large areas, such as women's legs and men's backs.”

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