

FEMALE PUBIC HAIR REMOVAL

On one level, it might seem that the subject of pubic hair removal by women is somewhat trivial and not worthy of serious consideration. However, the reasons why many women choose to remove their pubic hair, and the messages in the media and popular culture that encourage the removal of pubic hair, are interesting areas of research. The social, cultural and historical influences that affect the choice of personal hygiene and grooming techniques have been explored in recent studies on pubic hair removal. These studies introduce important concepts that relate to sexuality, body image, and the power of the popular media. This edition of *Check the Research* summarizes and discusses recent studies in this area of research. But first, let's look at a brief history of pubic hair removal throughout the ages.

HISTORY OF PUBIC HAIR REMOVAL

In reviewing the literature, Ramsey, Sweeney, Fraser and Oades (2009) note that statues from ancient Egypt and Greece provide evidence that some form of pubic hair removal was practiced by women in these cultures. The presence of pubic hair on women was considered to be “uncivilized”, and statues reflected the ideal of a hairless, feminine body. In Ancient Rome, body hair removal was most often practiced by upper class women. Women in Ancient Middle Eastern and African cultures also underwent various forms of pubic hair removal, and used such methods as shaving and plucking. Historians note that while pubic hair removal was not widely practiced during the Middle Ages, some European women removed pubic hair to avoid body lice (Ramsey et al.).

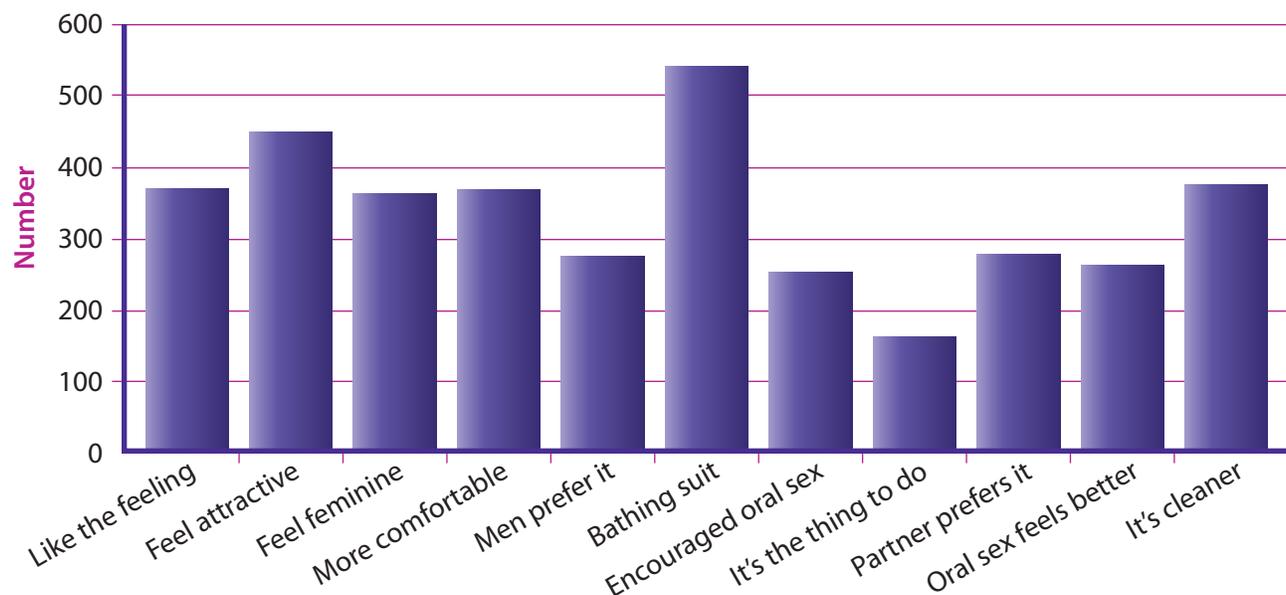
According to Hansen (2007), pubic hair removal was not common among western women until the 20th century. In the early part of the century, shaving of leg and underarm hair became acceptable, with the introduction of arm and leg baring fashions. In 1915, Gillette marketed the first razor for women with the message that body hair was “unsightly” and “objectionable” and needed to be removed. Body hair removal was characterized as being “feminine” and “sanitary.” With the introduction of the first bikini swimsuit in 1946, women were now faced with the need to remove pubic hair that might be exposed by this new fashion (Hansen).

With the rise of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, many women chose to accept their natural body hair and to reject culturally imposed ideals of hairless, childlike, feminine beauty (Dault, 2011). However, by the 1990s, it was becoming more common for women to practice some form of pubic hair removal at various times in their lives. Again, fashion and marketing played a role in pubic hair removal trends. Swimsuits and lingerie that necessitated the removal of most or all pubic hair, and an increasing abundance of body hair removal products and services, led to a gradual, cultural acceptance of the practice of pubic hair removal. Over recent years, pornography has also cultivated an image of the sexually attractive woman who is characterized by the absence of pubic hair. The growth of online pornography has meant that for many young men and women, this image is now considered to be the norm (Dault).

RECENT STUDIES

Studies on the practice of pubic hair removal have been conducted by researchers in the United States, Canada and Australia. While their findings are interesting and contribute to our understanding of why women choose to practice pubic hair removal, and of the prevalence among certain populations, it is important to consider the limitations of the research. These studies often involve self-selected groups of participants who volunteer for a study because they are interested in the subject matter, or because it is required by their course of study, in the case of university participants. This means that a study might not be representative of all women in the population. As well, the participants in recent studies are overwhelmingly white and heterosexual. Again, this means that these studies cannot be generalized to larger populations that are racially, culturally and sexually diverse.



FIGURE 1: REASONS FOR PUBIC HAIR REMOVAL AMONG 660 BRITISH COLUMBIA WOMEN


Top reasons given for pubic hair removal

Source: Riddell, L., Varto, H, Hodgson, Z.G. (2010). Smooth talking: The phenomenon of pubic hair removal in women. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 19 (3), 121-130. Responses combine "agree" and "strongly agree" on a five point scale.

A recent study of women in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia explored women's motivations for pubic hair removal (Riddell, Varto & Hodgson, 2010). The authors found that the most common reasons given for pubic hair removal were: "It looks better in a bathing suit"; "It makes me feel attractive"; "I feel feminine and more comfortable"; and "I think it is cleaner." Few participants indicated that they remove pubic hair based on societal expectations (i.e. "It's the thing to do.") (Figure 1) (Riddell, Varto & Hodgson, p. 124-125). However, some researchers have noted that even though women don't acknowledge societal pressure to remove pubic hair, certain standards of female beauty are so prevalent in advertising and popular media that they are merely absorbed unquestioningly by many women (Tiggeman & Hodgson, 2008). Riddell and colleagues also noted a number of physical complications among women in their study. These included razor burns, ingrown hairs, rashes and bacterial infections.

Researchers in the United States conducted a large internet study to determine the prevalence of pubic hair removal among women (Herbenick, Schick, Reece, Sanders & Forteberry, 2010). This study of over 2,400 women between the ages of 18 to 68 found a wide range of hair removal behaviours across age categories. Women who removed all of their pubic hair in the past month, either by waxing or shaving, were considered to be "typically hair free." Women aged 18 to 24 years reported the highest percentage (20%) of total hair removal, followed by 12% of women aged 25 to 29 years, 8% of women aged 30 to 39 years, 6.5% of women aged 40 to 49 years, and 2% of women over 50 years. The authors note that total pubic hair removal is often considered to be a social norm among women, however these findings indicate that many women do not practice total pubic hair removal on a consistent basis. Herbenick and colleagues speculate that the higher rates of total pubic hair removal among younger women may reflect the fact that this is a new trend that is being embraced by the younger generation. However, since women in the study were not specifically asked the reasons why they removed their pubic hair, this remains a speculation and not a proven conclusion.



Tiggemann and Hodgson (2008) surveyed 235 Australian female undergraduates asking them about their body hair removal practices and about the reasons why they removed body hair. The authors were also interested in whether various forms of popular media, specifically fashion magazines and television programs, influenced the decisions of women to remove their body hair. Almost all women in the study reported that they removed their leg (95%) and underarm (98%) hair, and 61% of the sample reported that they currently removed their pubic hair. Among women who removed their pubic hair, there was a considerable difference in the degree of removal, with 20% removing a little hair, 44% removing most hair, and 36% removing all hair. Waxing was cited as the preferred method of pubic hair removal. When asked why they chose to remove their pubic hair, the most common reasons given by women related to the desire to be sexually attractive and feminine. The authors note that, "attributing their own hair removal behaviour to femininity and sexual attractiveness reasons is exactly the kind of rationale that serves to keep women insecure about their bodies (Tiggemann & Hodgson, p.895). The study also demonstrated a link between reading fashion magazines and viewing specific television programmes (i.e. Sex and the City and Big Brother) and the frequency and amount of pubic hair removal. However, the question of whether advertising and popular media directly influence women to practice pubic hair removal cannot be answered by this research.

WHAT'S THE TAKE HOME MESSAGE?

The issue of pubic hair removal by women can be approached in various ways. It can provide an area of study for those interested in changing concepts of femininity and sexual attractiveness. It can also be an area of study for those concerned about the relationship between popular media and how women view their bodies. The historical trends associated with pubic hair removal can be viewed in the context of artistic, cultural, and social developments. The current research indicates that there is a wide range in terms of the prevalence and practices associated with pubic hair removal. While studies show that it has increased in popularity over the last decade, more research is needed to establish its acceptance and prevalence among broader segments of the female population.

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