

Body Hair

BBC Radio Bristol on air question.: Why do the fine hairs which cover the body not grow like the hairs on the scalp?

The colour of hair, whether it is straight or curly, its density and the duration of hair growth is determined whilst the baby (foetus) is forming in the womb. These characteristics are part of our genetic inheritance but this does not mean that any particular characteristic shows from one generation to that immediately succeeding it.

There is a difference between head hair and that found on the rest of the body. The fine hairs that cover the entire body are called vellous. These vellous hairs have a short life cycle of approximately 6 weeks. They are fine and downy with pointed ends. They are present everywhere on the body except for the soles of the feet, the palms of the hands and on the lips. Historically, people had thicker vellous hairs which helped retain body heat. Today, people may experience 'goosebumps' when vellous hairs stand proud due to a sudden change of temperature or a feeling of fear. This is due to the hair muscle (arrector pili) contracting and raising the follicle.

Shaving vellous hair does not increase the thickness or the growth rate. What does happen is that shaving leaves the tip of the fine hairs blunt. These blunt ends become coarse and rough to the touch. Because they become more noticeable, people then often think that the hairs have become more dense. However, if you were to have hair removed by the wax or sugar method, this rips the hair from the follicle. When hair regrows in the follicle, this is again fine and downy with soft pointed ends. Repeated use of wax for hair removal however can result in the hair follicle producing even finer hairs or none at all.

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