

Hirsutism

Excess hair growth in women — causes, evaluation, and treatment options

What Is Hirsutism?

Hirsutism is the growth of coarse, dark hair in women in areas where men typically grow hair — the face (upper lip, chin, sideburns), chest, abdomen, back, and inner thighs. It is caused by elevated androgens (male hormones such as testosterone and DHEAS) or by hair follicles that are unusually sensitive to normal androgen levels.

Common Causes

Cause	How Common	Notes
PCOS (Polycystic Ovary Syndrome)	Most common (~70–80%)	Also causes irregular periods and often weight gain
Idiopathic (no identifiable cause)	Second most common	Normal androgen levels; sensitive follicles
Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia (CAH)	Uncommon	Genetic; elevated 17-OHP on blood test
Adrenal tumor or Cushing's syndrome	Rare	Rapid onset; other signs present
Ovarian tumor	Rare	Very high testosterone levels
Medications	Uncommon	Steroids, danazol, some seizure meds

Blood Tests Your Doctor May Order

- Total and free testosterone
- DHEAS (dehydroepiandrosterone sulfate)
- LH and FSH
- 17-hydroxyprogesterone (screens for CAH)
- Cortisol and ACTH (if Cushing's is suspected)
- Prolactin
- Thyroid function (TSH)

Treatment Options

Medications (reduce androgen effect on follicles):

- **Spironolactone** — most commonly prescribed. Blocks androgen receptors. Takes 3–6 months for noticeable effect.

- **Combined oral contraceptives** — suppress ovarian androgen production.
- **Metformin** — improves insulin resistance in PCOS, which can lower androgens.
- **Finasteride** — less commonly used; blocks conversion of testosterone to DHT.

Hair removal options (cosmetic — do not address the cause):

- Laser hair removal — most effective long-term option
- Electrolysis — permanent; best for small areas
- Eflornithine cream (Vaniqa) — slows regrowth on face; prescription required
- Shaving, waxing, threading — temporary

Tip: Medication treatment for hirsutism requires patience — visible improvement usually takes 3–6 months. Combining medication with hair removal often gives the best results.