



THE NAKED APE

PERSONAL BEST EDITORS BARE ALL

■ DEAR READER,

Each month you turn to Personal Best for news and advice on everything from health to sex. There's something you should know, though. The editors of these pages are a couple of hairy goombahs. The gorillas at the Bronx Zoo look at us and feel naked. You get the picture.

Most of the time, we're OK with that; excess body hair is often the result of high testosterone levels, and it lends an alpha-male, libidinous appeal that we have no intention of shedding. But when chest hair begins to colonize your shoulders, neck and back, "alpha male" morphs all too quickly into "rug with legs." Enough is enough.

Until recently, the only recourse was a quick-fix remedy such as shaving or waxing, but neither is long-lasting, both are painful, and—let's face it—the sight of a man lathering his back or pouring molten wax on himself for noncarnal reasons puts in doubt the storied progress of mankind. Thanks to science, however, there has been a significant upgrade in the epilation field. Lasers and pulsed-light beams have been harnessed for zapping not only incoming missiles but also unwanted hairs. As Personal Best editors, we felt it was nothing less than our duty on behalf of all hairy-knuckle types to go under the ray gun and report on our experiences with two of the most popular high-tech procedures, the Alexandrite laser (at the Laser & Skin Surgery Center of New York; www.laserskinsurgery.com) and EpiLight intense-pulsed-light (IPL) therapy (at the Completely Bare spa on the East Side of Manhattan; www.completelybare.com).

MIDWINTER MIGHT SEEM A LITTLE EARLY TO start thinking about molting excess hair for next summer's beach days, but midwinter is actually the best time, for two reasons. These hair-removal techniques require multiple visits to the dermatologist or spa, with at least a month between each appointment. Depending on the size of the area treated, the entire procedure could take as long as half a year. Moreover, the success rate is highest when the skin is light (or untanned) and the offending hairs dark—after several sunless months, your body should be well prepped.

The idea behind laser or intense-pulsed-light therapy is to target hair follicles beneath the skin while leaving the surface intact. After one has been shaved and (in the case of laser therapy) treated with a numbing cream, a beam of concentrated light energy is applied in millisecond bursts to the skin. Each pulse, about the diameter of a quarter, passes through the skin, is absorbed by the pigment in the hair follicles and is converted into thermal energy that cripples the follicles' ability to grow.

No, this doesn't cause cancer (no ultraviolet rays are involved), but it does smart and would cause a burn if the skin weren't simultaneously cooled by either a gel or a cryogen spray. Any doctor who tells you you're not going to feel a fairly sharp, albeit

brief, pain hasn't gone under the epilatory knife himself. The pain is real, like being snapped with a rubber band, but so momentary you can reassure yourself that every zap is one less to endure.

Both techniques, the laser and the intense-pulsed-light therapy, have their advocates. At the Laser & Skin Surgery Center, Leonard Bernstein, M.D., says that in head-to-head competition, lasers, which use a single wavelength of energy to do their deed, are more effective than IPL in removing hair permanently and avoiding skin damage. IPL partisans claim greater success because pulsed-light beams can be modified to whatever wavelength the dermatologist or technician feels is best suited to the patient's skin type. For us, in a highly unscientific and short-term comparison (one of us tried the laser, the other IPL), the results were equally impressive.

Immediately after our first treatments, we experienced some redness and irritation; like a sunburn, this soon faded. Within several days, thick stubble began to appear, but this was not cause to panic that we were having some sort of reverse reaction. These were old hairs being purged from their shafts, and they would fall out over the course of the next two weeks. It was too soon to tell how much hair would eventually regrow, but we were told to expect a 15 to 30 percent permanent reduction of hair after each session. (Complete hair removal from, say, a back would require three to six visits.) At about \$500 per appointment, one can easily run up a steep tab at the doctor's office, but avoiding those "ape-man" comments is priceless. —PETER RUBIN AND TIM SULTAN