

We can face it



1,000 Women's Survey Report

Revealing the impact of unwanted
facial hair on UK women

Introduction

Unwanted facial hair in women (also known as excessive facial hair and facial hirsutism) is surprisingly common – around 40% of women report having some degree of unwanted hair on their face¹ – but it is still something of a taboo subject and is rarely discussed.

“ *I feel I have had it all my life. I have a daughter who is only two and a half and I can see she is already hairy like me. I also have a twin sister who does not have as much as me and I can't understand why* ”

Unwanted facial hair affects women of all ages, races and hair colours. The degree of severity can vary dramatically from woman to woman, and women react to having facial hair in very different ways. Some women are relaxed about living with facial hair, while for others, it can be a major source of anxiety and distress.

This report is being launched as part of the *We Can Face It* campaign, designed specifically to tackle the taboo of unwanted facial hair head on. The report draws together the results of a major piece of research among 1,000 women with unwanted facial hair – the first of its kind in the UK. It uncovers how they really feel, how the condition impacts on daily life and how they cope with the condition. It also demonstrates that the support needs of these women are not currently being met.

A panel of distinguished experts, all highly experienced in the field of unwanted facial hair, was consulted to guide the research contained within this report. Here, the panel introduce themselves and explain why they became involved in the campaign:

“ *I remember driving to work and it caught my eye in the mirror and I hadn't realised it was so bad under my chin and I had to spend the whole day at work without my tweezers* ”



Dr Dawn Harper, General Practitioner, Gloucestershire



I am a GP with a special interest in women's health and as such, I'm really pleased to be involved with this campaign. The results of the survey highlight how unwanted facial hair can influence everything from a woman's relationships, her social life and even her professional life. This is something that I see first hand in the surgery but in fact I would say I don't see it often enough! Too many women who suffer with unwanted facial hair do so in silence, some I am sure from embarrassment but many because they don't know enough about the treatment options. I am hoping that this campaign will raise awareness amongst the public and help

more women come forward and ask for help.

Dr Alexandra Mizara, Counselling Psychologist at the Royal Free Hospital in London



Unwanted facial hair (UFH) is a condition that is clearly distressing for women. The psychological and emotional consequences of suffering with facial hirsutism usually involve feelings of profound shame and stigmatisation, constant worry and anxiety over attractiveness and femininity and compromised quality of life. The survey of 1,000 women with UFH has shown that these women present with high levels of anxiety, depression and social difficulties in their day-to-day lives. However, so far there has been little recognition of the emotional impact of UFH and especially little support as to how women can overcome their difficulties.

A substantial proportion of women with UFH would hesitate to openly discuss how they feel about their condition and to ask their GP for advice on treatment options. The *We Can Face It* campaign is an important initiative towards changing this. I feel really happy and excited to be involved in the *We Can Face It* campaign and hope that the campaign increases awareness amongst women around the issues faced when living with UFH.

Professor Steve Franks, Professor of Reproductive Endocrinology Imperial College London and Consultant Endocrinologist at St Mary's and Hammersmith Hospitals, London



Unwanted facial hair is a very common problem that causes enormous distress to those many women who suffer from it. However the general public (and indeed many medical practitioners) are unaware of the extent of the problem and the emotional disturbance that it can evoke. It is not just a question of the inconvenience and embarrassment involved in dealing with unwanted hair; it may also be an indication of an underlying hormonal problem.

In many women the appearance of excess facial hair is a symptom of polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS). So unwanted facial hair is not just a cosmetic problem, it may be an

important symptom of a hormonal disorder that needs further, specialist investigation and appropriate treatment.

Charlotte Footman, Electrologist Advisor at St Mary's Hospital London



Working so closely with patients who suffer the embarrassment and misery associated with excessive facial hair growth, I have long been frustrated that there is so little information, medical help or support for these women. That's why I have taken the opportunity to become part of the *We Can Face It* campaign. I'd like to use my experience to help raise awareness of this important, but often overlooked condition. So many women suffer loss of confidence and self esteem and are left alone to cope with the physical and psychological effects of living with excess and unwanted facial hair growth. I'm confident that this campaign will bring to light just

what a common but 'secret' problem unwanted facial hair is. But more importantly it should help women to realise they are not alone.

Rachel Hawkes, Chair, Verity, charity for women with polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)



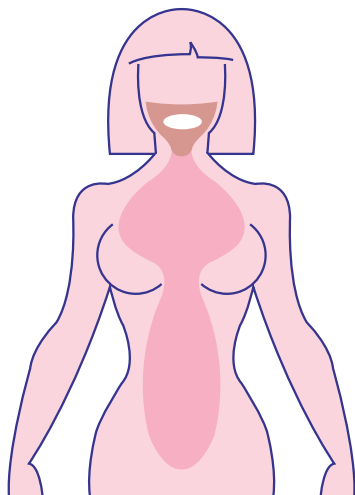
Excess facial hair is extremely common and more widespread than people realise because women with the condition are usually reluctant to discuss the subject due to the shame and embarrassment that they feel. Excess facial hair is one of the worst symptoms reported by the members of Verity because it often has a negative impact on quality of life, causing women to become isolated and withdrawn. I feel that creating like-minded communities is an essential form of support for these women and this is why I am extremely happy that the *We Can Face It* campaign is bringing women together and encouraging them to talk more openly about the

condition. The findings of this report are really important as they allow us to create a dialogue around excess facial hair, which will show women that they are not alone and that help is available. As a result of the *We Can Face It* campaign I would like to see women become more confident in seeking support and information from their GPs, patient support groups, friends and family members.

What is unwanted facial hair?

Unwanted facial hair or UFH is the term used to describe excess hair on areas of the face² such as the upper lip and chin. It is also sometimes called excess or excessive facial hair.

Hirsutism is the medical term for women showing excess body hair in regions supposedly characteristic of masculine hair growth. As a result the neck, chest, abdomen and back may also be affected.³



Most women would deem facial hair as undesirable but UFH relates to a growth of hair that has become excessive and problematic. It is natural for all women to have some facial hair but this is usually soft, fine and downy. However, excessive facial hair is recognised as being thicker, more coarse and sometimes darker, often occurring in larger and denser patches. This hair can extend from the upper lip, across cheeks, chin, sideburns and jawline, where it can be more obvious and considered to be an abnormal pattern of growth.

What causes unwanted facial hair?

There are a number of possible causes of unwanted facial hair. These fall into three main areas: **inherited/familial or ethnic factors**,⁴ side effects of certain **medications and hormonal factors, including Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS)**.⁵ In some cases, the cause of unwanted facial hair is unknown and this is referred to as idiopathic or constitutional unwanted facial hair.⁴



Inherited/familial or ethnic factors: In many women, the tendency to develop unwanted facial hair is inherited.⁴ Ethnic background is also a factor – women from Mediterranean or South Asian backgrounds tend to have darker, denser hair and this may make the facial hair more noticeable.

“ I am naturally a very hairy person. I developed unwanted facial hair at puberty, and have suffered for over 25 years ”

“ I don't talk to anyone, even girlfriends – it's more of a taboo than your love life ”

Medication: Some medicines can encourage hair growth on the face and elsewhere.

Medicines associated with unwanted facial hair⁵

- **Glucocorticoids (steroids):** often used to treat allergies and asthma and in patients who have undergone organ transplants or who have autoimmune disorders
- **Cyclosporin:** used to treat psoriasis, eczema and arthritis and in patients who have undergone organ transplants
- **Phenytoin:** used to treat epilepsy
- **Diazoxide:** used to treat hypoglycaemia (low blood sugar) or very high blood pressure
- **Minoxidil:** the oral version is used to treat very high blood pressure

This list is not exhaustive and any woman who thinks her medication may be causing her facial hair should talk to her doctor. It is important never to stop taking any prescribed medication without seeking medical advice.

Hormonal factors: All women produce small amounts of male-type hormones such as testosterone. If levels become too high, male characteristics such as facial hair, deepening of the voice and acne, can develop. The hormonal changes at menopause can lead to unwanted facial hair in some women.⁶ Obesity can also affect hormonal balance and this can result in unwanted facial hair.

Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS): PCOS is a condition in which the ovaries produce excess levels of male-type hormones and is a common cause of unwanted facial hair.⁷

Rachel Hawkes, Chair of Verity, a self-help group for women with PCOS, explains:

“Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) can cause a variety of different symptoms but unwanted facial hair is often one of the most obvious ones. PCOS can't be cured, but it can be treated so it's important to get a correct diagnosis. Verity is a support group run by and for women with PCOS. There's lots of information and support available to women with PCOS, and on the Verity website (www.verity-pcos.org.uk) we have an active discussion board where you can chat with other women who understand what you're going through.”

“ I was sitting on a train going to London for an interview and I was worried because I hadn't managed my facial hair that morning ”

Pinpointing the cause of unwanted facial hair

The only way to determine what is causing unwanted facial hair is by visiting a healthcare professional for a formal diagnosis. This is important, since it is much easier to decide the most appropriate treatment once the cause is known.



Here come the girls

The 1,000 Women's Survey Report is the first major piece of research conducted among women with unwanted facial hair in the UK.

To date, the topic of unwanted facial hair seems to have been shrouded in secrecy and very little has been written about it. To uncover the true picture 1,000 women with unwanted facial hair were surveyed. They were asked about their attitudes and habits and questioned about the impact that unwanted facial hair has on their daily life, including how it makes them feel.

The findings reveal the full emotional impact of unwanted facial hair for the first time and highlight the fact that having facial hair can affect every aspect of daily life, from work and social life to personal relationships. The results also show that the needs of women affected by unwanted facial hair are not currently being met.

How the research was carried out

The online survey was carried out by Opinion Health among 1,000 women throughout the UK aged from 18 to over 65 years who had been identified as having unwanted facial hair. The research was conducted in February and March 2010.

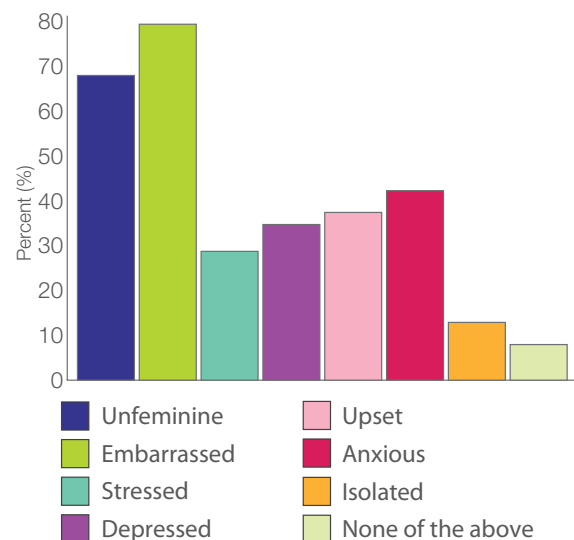
The results

How does having unwanted facial hair make women feel?

Unwanted facial hair has a major impact on the emotional well-being and self-esteem of women – they feel unfeminine, embarrassed and anxious:⁸

- 98% of women experience negative feelings as a result of having facial hair⁸
- More than half (57%) of women with unwanted facial hair feel anxious or very anxious if they know they have visible facial hair and cannot remove it⁸
- Two out of three women (68%) said their unwanted facial hair makes them feel unfeminine⁸
- Almost 80% of women feel embarrassed⁸
- Almost 90% of women surveyed would feel more confident if they didn't have facial hair⁸
- Over a quarter of women under 35 felt negative all the time about having facial hair⁸

Do you experience any of the following feelings as a result of having facial hair?



“ Some of my facial hair is now really thick and horrible – you could strike a match on them ”

Does unwanted facial hair impact on employment prospects?

Our research shows that having unwanted facial hair can prevent women from achieving their full potential in the workplace:

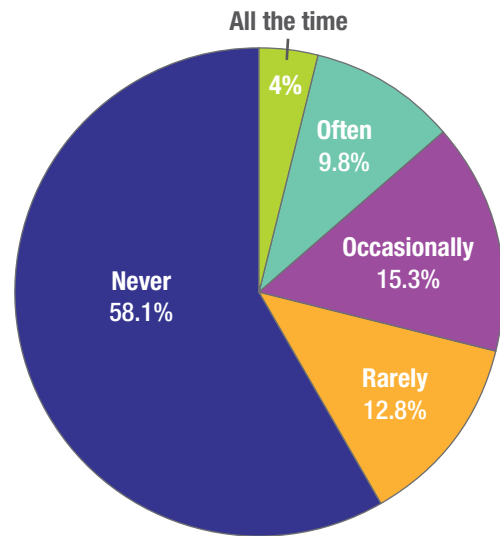
- A quarter said that having unwanted facial hair had stopped them from going for a promotion at work⁸
- Over a quarter of women surveyed hold back from putting themselves forward for tasks at work because of their facial hair⁸ (see graph)



When you are with other females you size them up, you look to see if they have any [facial hair] and then you are envious if they have nice skin



How often does having facial hair stop you putting yourself forward for tasks at work?

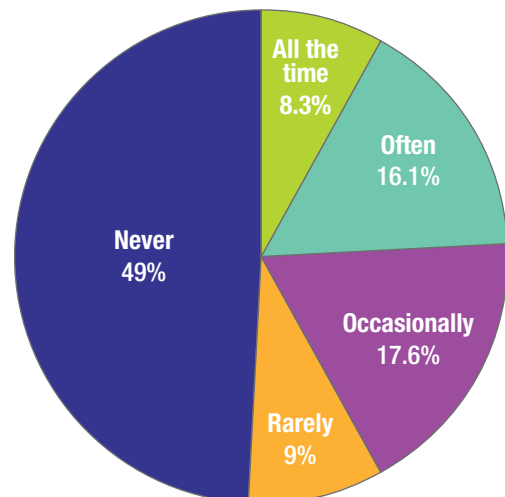


Can unwanted facial hair act as a social barrier?

Many of the women we surveyed felt that having unwanted facial hair had a significant impact on their social life and on their relationships:

- More than a third (38%) of participants in the research said having unwanted facial hair has stopped them from going out socially⁸
- Four out of ten (42%) of those surveyed said their facial hair had, at some point, prevented them from going out on dates and a similar percentage (43%) felt that it had affected their ability to form relationships⁸ (see graph)
- Only 3% of women interviewed felt that other people (other than family and friends) found facial hair to be completely acceptable⁸

How often does having facial hair stop you going on dates?



We also asked women how they manage their facial hair on a practical basis – what techniques do they use, how long do they spend on a daily basis and how much does it cost?

The vast majority of women surveyed self-manage their condition⁸ e.g. tweezing, shaving and plucking, and for most, keeping their facial hair under control is a time-consuming, and often expensive, business:

- The next most popular option is self-management with the use of over-the-counter products – more than a quarter (29%) opt for this approach⁸
- Only 6% of women surveyed currently see a healthcare professional regarding their facial hair⁸
- 40% of women currently manage their facial hair on a daily basis (some of these several times a day)⁸ and almost a third (31%) have to undertake some form of management every few days⁸

Who do women turn to for support?

The final part of the survey focused on sources of support – how often do women confide in family and friends and how likely are they to seek help from health professionals? The results show that women are extremely reluctant to discuss facial hair – even with their nearest and dearest – and few seek medical advice:

- More than half the women surveyed (58%) felt uncomfortable talking to their family about their problem. More than two out of three women (69%) felt uncomfortable discussing their facial hair with their friends⁸
- Women feel equally uncomfortable talking to their GP about facial hair: less than half (42%) stated they would feel comfortable discussing this subject at the doctor's surgery⁸
- Few women have sought help from the GP: less than a fifth (19%) have been to see their doctor about their facial hair⁸

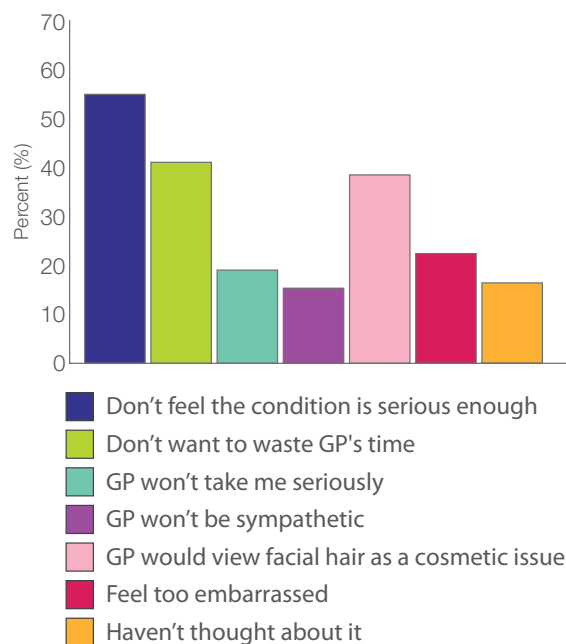
This reluctance to seek medical help is based on a number of reasons:

- More than half (55%) don't think the condition is serious enough⁸
- 41% don't want to waste their GP's time⁸
- More than a third (38%) think that their GP will regard facial hair as a purely cosmetic concern⁸
- More than a third (34%) fear they won't be taken seriously or their GP won't be sympathetic to their condition⁸
- Almost a quarter (22%) feel too embarrassed to see their GP⁸
- 16% have never even considered seeking medical advice⁸

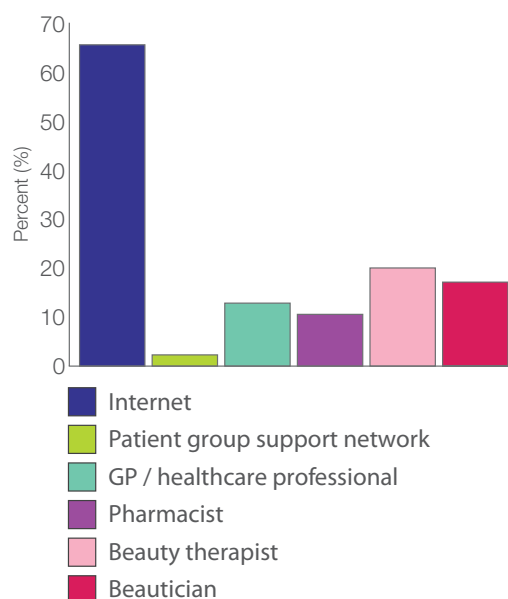
So where are women currently seeking information about unwanted facial hair?

- The internet is the first port of call for most women – two-thirds use this as the primary source of information.⁸ This proportion drops in women over the age of 61 but the internet still remains the key information source for at least half of this age group⁸
- Only 13% of women had approached a GP or other health professional for advice⁸ and for pharmacists, the figure is just 11%.⁸ In the under 40 age group, the percentage of women seeking help from their GP or pharmacist rises to 21%⁸ suggesting that this age group is more pro-active about seeking information
- One in five women (21%) seek advice from their beauty therapist⁸ and 17% have asked their beautician for help⁸

What stops you from going to see your GP?



Where do you currently go to seek information on facial hair?



“ “ *It’s such a taboo you just don’t generally talk about it to people* ” ”

What do women want?

Finally, women with unwanted facial hair were asked what additional support would be helpful.

Half of women would like to see more materials such as leaflets, and greater access to patient-specific websites on the subject of facial hair:

- Almost 70% of women called for a wider range of treatment options and for treatments to be more readily available⁸
- 44% called on healthcare professionals to provide more advice and support for women with unwanted facial hair⁸
- Over a third (37%) would like to see better awareness among healthcare professionals and the general public⁸

“ “ *Every time I go to the bathroom I spend 10 minutes sorting myself out* ” ”

These responses show there is currently a significant unmet need. The *We Can Face It* campaign aims to plug the gaps in terms of information and support and to help women to manage their condition more effectively. Charlotte Footman, Electrologist at St Mary’s Hospital London comments on the findings:

“What I see and hear from patients would indicate that the survey’s findings are just the tip of the iceberg. We really can’t underestimate the importance of what the statistics uncovered. One figure that I find worryingly high (but not surprising) is that 80% of the women surveyed have never approached their GP for help with their condition. I’m hoping this campaign will help GPs to further understand the needs of these women, and help them to advise on the most appropriate treatment and support”.



“ “ *I feel if I went to my GP, as lovely as she is, she wouldn’t take me seriously about my facial hair. She has more important things to deal with and would expect me to sort it out myself* ” ”

Taking action

The first step to managing your facial hair is to find out what is causing it. To do this, you will need to visit your doctor for a formal diagnosis. Our research has shown that women can be reluctant to seek medical advice; however pinpointing the cause will make it much easier to decide on the most effective treatment for you.

If you're not sure whether you should seek medical advice, try our quick quiz below.

How much is too much?

The Skin Academy⁹ – a European organisation that develops education and awareness programmes on dermatology – has developed a short quiz. Just answer these simple questions to find out whether you should think about seeing your GP...

- Does having unwanted facial hair interfere with your daily life?
- Do you check for hairs on your face more often than before?
- Do you feel worried or depressed about having facial hair?
- In the last few weeks, have you felt that other people are looking at you more often than before?
- Are you very keen to reduce your unwanted hair growth?

If you answered 'yes' to three or more of these questions, it is worth making an appointment to see your doctor. Your facial hair is obviously having a major impact on your life and it would be a good idea to find out whether there is any underlying cause for your symptoms.

Tips for taking control

Remember, you are certainly not the only women to be affected by unwanted facial hair – there are thousands of other women in the same position as you. So if your facial hair is causing you distress or concern there is no need to suffer in silence. Help yourself to feel more in control of the situation by following these simple tips:

- Find out as much as you can about unwanted facial hair – it always helps to know what you are dealing with! There are a number of websites you can consult that contain a wealth of information about unwanted facial hair and how to cope with it, including www.verity-pcos.org.uk and www.wecanfaceit.com
- Speak to your GP to find out possible causes of your unwanted facial hair. Ask to discuss treatment options and what might work best for you
- Nowadays, there are plenty of alternatives for managing unwanted facial hair, from DIY solutions that can be used at home or in the beauty salon to specialist techniques or medical treatments that can provide a longer-term solution
- Don't bottle things up – it's easy to get things out of proportion if you keep them to yourself. Talk to someone you trust – whether it's your mother, sister, a friend or your doctor
- Focus on your appearance as a whole – not just your facial hair. Emphasise your good points and remember that other people are probably far too busy bothering about their own appearance to notice your facial hair

Go girls!

If you're still not sure what to do about your facial hair, listen to the advice from women like you who live with the problem on a daily basis. Their advice could be the incentive you need to get your facial hair under control once and for all.

For more information you can visit the following websites:

- **The British Association of Dermatologists** (leaflets on hirsutism [unwanted facial hair] and laser hair removal) www.bad.org.uk
- **The British Institute and Association of Electrolysis** (BIAE), is a non profit making organisation founded from the amalgamation of the two specialist electrolysis bodies www.electrolysis.co.uk
- **Verity**, support group for women with Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS), one of the possible causes of unwanted facial hair www.verity-pcos.org.uk
- **Embarrassing Bodies (Channel 4 Programme)**. Information on unwanted/excess facial hair <http://www.channel4embarrassingillnesses.com/conditions/hirsutism/>
- **We Can Face It** campaign website, with more information on unwanted facial hair, how to manage the condition, coping strategies and hearing from other women www.wecanfaceit.com



Talk to other people with unwanted facial hair. It's really nice being able to chat to people who know what you're talking about; it makes you feel less strange!

Shazia

I don't let my facial hair get me down too much but I'm lucky – I've got supportive friends, family and colleagues who have all played a part in helping me cope with the condition and stay positive.

Having a good sense of humour also helps!

Julie

Meeting up with other women with unwanted facial hair made me feel more confident. Sitting in a room with other people who suffer from the condition was good fun – it made me aware that I am not alone

June

I'd definitely encourage women to go and see their GP a lot sooner than I did as there might be an underlying cause that can be treated

Emma



Acknowledgements

We are grateful to all the women who took part in this ground-breaking research – their contributions will help to improve the situation for women with unwanted facial hair.

The quotes used in this report are taken from focus groups carried out in London and Manchester on 11 and 12 January 2010 by Opinion Health. We are grateful to the women who participated in this research and who talked so openly about having facial hair.

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