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What is Hirsutism?

Hirsutism is the medical term for excess body or facial hair in women. It is usually caused by an increased production of a group of hormones called androgens ("male hormones") or an increased sensitivity of the skin to these hormones.

Why is hirsutism an important issue?

Hirsutism is not a disease, and it is rarely caused by a serious underlying disorder. Nevertheless, in our society, too much facial or body hair is considered abnormal. Excess hair growth can cause great psychological distress or social embarrassment. It is often a treatable problem, but many women do not realize that treatments are available.

Who is most affected?

For most women, the tendency towards hirsutism is inherited. Excess hair growth may be present in both the female and male family members. Hirsutism usually begins around puberty, but mild hirsutism can start at any age. Most women gradually develop more facial or body hair with age. Because it is not considered a suitable topic of conversation, many affected women do not realize how common a problem it is. At least 25% of normal middle-aged women remove unwanted facial hair. Rarely, hirsutism is a result of a serious underlying disorder, but this can easily be ruled out with a medical history and some simple blood tests.

Who should see a doctor?

Because treatments are available, any woman who has trouble controlling body or facial hair by mechanically removing it may benefit from medical evaluation. Endocrinologists are concerned about underlying medical problems if the hirsutism is severe, if it is accompanied by menstrual problems, if there are other features to suggest a marked

increase in androgens such as baldness or deepening of the voice, or if accompanied by obesity or type 2 diabetes. Women with mild hirsutism and regular menstrual cycles rarely have an underlying medical problem.

Can hirsutism be treated?

Yes. The treatment of hirsutism can be divided into mechanical treatments, which physically remove unwanted hair, and medical treatments, which reduce the effect of androgens on the skin.

What is the role of endocrinology?

Endocrinologists usually have considerable experience in managing the medical treatment of patients with hirsutism.

Endocrinologists can provide:

- Reassurance to women about normal patterns of hair growth.
- An appropriate investigation to rule out serious underlying problems.
- A discussion of the different options for treatment, including ways of removing hair and medicines that can reduce the amount of hair.

Endocrine research has helped us to better understand the causes of hirsutism and has made many advances in the effective treatment of excess hair growth in women. It has also helped us to expand the knowledge of the relation between hirsutism, abnormal menstrual cycles and type 2 diabetes.