

What it's like to get laser hair removal as a black woman

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I'm hairy—that's just fact, and it's something I've always been aware of. I'll never forget being in summer camp as a kid, wearing shorts every day and becoming very aware that my legs were much hairier than those of the girls around me. Now, I'm no longer ashamed of being hairy—I've actually come to embrace it. But in the past two decades, I've gotten very acquainted with epilators, including laser hair removal.

I got my first laser hair removal treatment two years ago. It seemed like everyone was getting it done, but as a black woman, I knew I wasn't "everyone." For brown skin, laser hair removal isn't a spur-of-the-moment decision, a process that should be approached through a Groupon or the local nail salon (yes, some nail salons *actually perform laser hair removal*). *For us, the process can be a bit more expensive and tedious, and should be approached with the utmost caution.*

Why? Well, lasers target pigment, and due to the high content of melanin in our skin, risks of discoloration and hyper-pigmentation are astronomically higher. So that's why, according to Chris Karavolas, owner of Romeo And Juliette Laser Hair Removal, darker skin requires a completely different laser all together, and operators with much more experience. "Darker skin complexions need to be careful because not all centers have the right lasers for dark skin, and even if they do they do, many do not have enough experience in treating dark skin," he says.

When it comes to those specialized lasers, there are two options. "It's important to treat with an Nd:YAG laser, such as the Candela GentleYAG or GentleMax Pro," says Anne Chapas, M.D., medical director of Union Square Laser Dermatology in New York City. "The wavelength of a YAG laser goes deeper into the skin than a diode laser and is less absorbed by the surrounding skin pigment, so it more successfully treats the stem cells of the hair follicle." Additionally, more treatments may be required than for fairer skin: "Expect to receive at least six sessions," Chapas says.

Knowing all these things, I went into laser hair removal with cautious optimism. I chose to treat my Brazilian area—years of improper hair removal had left me with ingrown and severe discoloration, to the point that my wax lady refused to continue treating me because my skin had gotten so irritated. I was sure that I wanted to continue being hair-free down there, so I decided to get laser hair removal on my vagina area. I was nervous heading into my first appointment, so I made sure to ask the aesthetician at Romeo & Juliette in-depth questions about her experience with dark skin, as well as requesting to see photos of previous clients and inquiring about a patch test. Then, it was showtime.

I like to think that I have a pretty high pain tolerance. However, laser removal certainly made me question that belief. I won't lie and say that it didn't hurt. It did. It felt like being snapped, hard, by rubber bands, but it was quick, and the results I saw were almost immediate. I was advised to shave right before the treatment, in order to give the laser immediate access to the hair follicle, and because, well, nobody likes the smell of burning hair. After about 10 minutes, I was sent on my way and advised to come back in another six weeks. Laser hair removal requires a strict schedule and works in conjunction with the hair cycle for optimal results. Every appointment thereafter was just as easy, and now, completely through all six of my sessions, my hair is almost completely gone, with the occasional stubble appearing here and there.

So how do you know if your skin will need one of these specialized lasers? “Different ethnicities—regardless of skin tone—react differently to lasers. Your skin may appear to be a 3 or 4 on the Fitzpatrick scale, but if you’re, say, Latin or Asian, it could react to the laser as a 6 would,” Dr. Chapas says. “So be sure to have your treatments done with a board-certified dermatologist experienced in skin and laser surgery.”