

"It's really itchy," complained my friend as she scratched her crevice. "Perhaps you shouldn't be shaving there. After all, if evolution has left hair down there, it's probably for a reason," I helpfully said. "In that case," she retorted, "why do you shave your armpits?" She has a point. Why am I bothering?

I'm certainly not alone, however: 84 per cent of women remove underarm hair and 96 per cent remove hair from their legs. The £280m spent a year by women in the UK on hair removal proves Germaine Greer's assertion that "however much body hair a woman has, it is too much." In *Whole Woman*, she points out that, "A woman who disported herself in a bikini out of which a bush of pubic hair sprouted would be regarded as a walking obscenity."

Forget pubic hair; unshaven armpits cause public outcry. The hysteria resulting from the sight of Julia Roberts's underarm hair at a film premiere sent a message to women everywhere – it is unacceptable and scandalous not to shave.

Body hair indicates growing up. The wish for a smooth body is the wish for a body which is sexless and forever young

Tolerance of body hair is ever diminishing. Studies show that the age at which girls start removing hair gets younger and younger. The standard bikini wax – the only option until recently – has now been replaced in popularity by the Brazilian in fashionable waxing salons. A traditional Brazilian includes the sensitive labia and the area between the buttocks, leaving a tiny rectangle or "landing strip". For some, even this is too hairy; the Hollywood – where everything comes off – is the new Brazilian.

Women's never-ending preoccupation with removing hair from places it "shouldn't be" – eyebrows, upper lips, legs, breasts, stomachs and armpits – is spreading to men. The hairless look is no longer confined to swimmers and body-builders. Adverts nearly always feature hairless men, and we now know that footballer Frank Lampard waxes his chest and armpits while David Beckham, who was last seen with heavily-plucked eyebrows, has the "back, sack and crack" depilation treatment. In the US, the "Boy-zilian" is quickly gaining popularity. Like the women's counterpart, the Boy-zilian removes all the hair around the private area.

"A small patch can be left above your genitals for aesthetic purposes. Half of the men have been sent in by a wife or girlfriend. And, once a man does this, he is back on a regular basis to keep doing it," says Craig Fossella, owner of TruSpa in San Francisco.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the hairy chests of Sean Connery and Tom Selleck were very much part of their appeal. But as per capita spending on men's skin care products has rocketed by 134 per cent between 1997 and 2002, we should not



Smooth operators

What is it with body hair? Why can't we stand the sight of a furry leg or a bushy armpit? And why is everyone having a Brazilian? Hell, even plucky men are playing the depilation game, says Emma Gold

be surprised. Last year, hair removal manufacturer, Nair, launched the market's first product for men while Boots is now looking into stocking a new line called Back, Sack and Crack.

Although we may believe smooth is more attractive to the opposite sex, the statistics don't always agree. According to a survey conducted by Nair, 81 per cent of women prefer to see men with hair on their chests. Men's response to women who don't shave their legs was more encouraging than expected. Although 9 per cent of men would run for the door if they

discovered their date had not shaved their legs, the majority – 57 per cent – would not be put off. As for women who ventured out in public with hairy legs, an encouraging 26 per cent of men felt it would be refreshing to see women unconstrained by society's demands.

Are there any advantages to removing hair? According to one study in the US, 24 hours after cleansing only one out of 10 shaved armpits was odorous, compared with nine in 10 unshaved pits. But apart from swimming – a study done at East Caroline University in the

US showed that shaving body hair increased distance travelled per stroke by 5 per cent – there appears to be no other reason for its removal. Why then, do we bother?

The tradition of women shaving can be traced back to 1915 when an ad in *Harper's Bazaar* featured a woman showing perfectly clear armpits. A marketing assault followed in the 1920s by Wilkinson Sword to persuade women that underarm hair was unfeminine. The anti-leg hair campaign was more fitful – depending on

How I joined the back, sack, crack club

"Could you hold it at 10-to, as tight as you can?" These were the last words I heard before I experienced the most terrifically intense pain of my life. I had come to the Sugar Shop in London's Paddington, the frontline of men's grooming, to find the answer to a few questions about the infamous back, sack and crack. These were: is it really as painful as it sounds? What's the appeal? And could it ever catch on among average heterosexual blokes? As that first strip of molten sugar was ripped away, at least that was the first question answered.

But that's not what I was thinking at the time. Oh no. I was laughing hysterically. No really. It's not that I found it funny (though my depilator clearly found it amusing to show me the strip of hair-covered cloth), but the pain had sent me into a simian state and laughter was my response to fear. Of course, a more sensible choice might have been to put my underpants back on (oh yes, you're completely naked in there – the tiny towel is discarded after the back phase), but by this point, things were pretty surreal.

Back: no problem. No hair there anyway, just the odd straggler. Crack: problem. At the Sugar Shop they do the whole peach-to-nectarine transformation. Martyn (the owner) describes this as, "following the line of your Speedos". I wanted to point out that I wear shorts, but hey, in for a penny. And a bit of fluff may smart as it's



wrenched out by the root, but it's not too bad. No, the problem was the crack itself. Not just the pain either. You try kneeling on all fours on a table in front of a stranger and "holding your balls forward" (his phrase) while a squidgy sugary blob is repeatedly squashed into the aforementioned area and pulled out. So, I'm glad they leave the sack until the end. A veil of weirdness is great for deadening pain.

With everything from three to nine removed (Martyn's "which exit off the roundabout?" jargon works well for nethers), and everything from nine to three just trimmed, it was all over. And it felt, well, fine. Maybe relief and two pre-emptive Nurofen-plus (a tip from a female colleague) had something to do with it. But the pain dissolved almost as quickly as it hit. In fact it felt better than fine. Kind of nice, even.

As the days have gone by, I think I've found the answers I was looking for. Would your average middle-England bloke get depilated? My shiny arse, would he. First there's the pain, then there's the whole hands-on thing. A committed metrosexual? Maybe, but only under orders from his girlfriend. Would I do it again? Well, bum – possibly. It'll be a good bargaining chip come winter (I've been rehearsing the line: "OK, I know you're not going to a beach, babe, but I've had it done"). But it feels plasticky; I miss the downy acknowledgement of my natural mammalianhood.

And so to the final stage of demystification: what did the missus reckon of it? "Oh my god! Hmmm it's rather nice actually." I told her that particular bit wasn't going near a wax strip ever again. She smiled. "One word: regrowth. All that itching – give it six weeks and you'll be back." It's enough to make the hairs on the back of your neck stand up. What's left of them. *Christian Broughton*

the rise and fall of hemlines – but advertisers, as well as fashion writers harped on that leg hair was a curse. Eventually, we got the message.

If commercial motives were behind the spread of hair removal, are they now responsible for the present male fashion? Dr John McInnes, author of *The End of Masculinity* says: "Men doing all the things that women traditionally do, and vice versa, is ultimately down to the capitalist market and its appetite for expansion. Why restrict sales to half the population?"

Status plays a part in our desire to be smooth. Removing hair is a way of showing that you have the time and money. Today, a Brazilian at Nicky Clarke will set you back £38, takes 45 minutes and regrowth means a repeat visit in five weeks. In Nair's survey, the higher the socio-economic group, the more women were likely to feel they had "a lot of body hair".

The obsession with youth may be another factor. "Body hair indicates growing up – losing the smooth appearance of youth. It is also

associated with crude masculinity. So the wish for a smooth body is the wish for a body which is sexless and forever young," says psychotherapist Shula Wilson. "Hair also symbolises power as in Samson, so a hairless body is also seen as powerless and submissive." For women, this has political implications. Naomi Wolf, author of *The Beauty Myth*, argues that the idealisation of youth carries the political agenda of powerlessness, and arises at particular times when women are perceived to have become too powerful.

Before it gets worse – and it will – 25 per cent of middle-aged women have unwanted facial hair and 10 per cent of 65-year-old women have noticeable chin hair, will any of us take a stand against the demands of youth, commercialism and politics? Will the 14 per cent of men currently removing body hair multiply as soon as Back, Sack and Crack hits Boots's shelves? Or can we throw away our razors, tweezers and waxing kits? All those in favour raise a hand. Especially if you haven't shaved your armpits. ■



Emma Gold's Sexploits

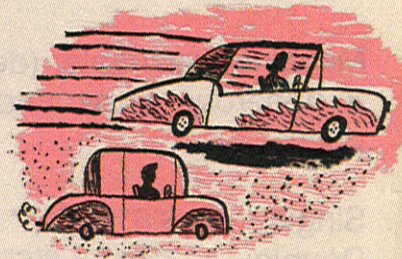
Driven to distraction

The most important thing about your sex drive is not that it is high, nor low, but that it matches that of your partner. My idea of hell is to fall in love with a man who sees no reason to indulge in sexual relations more than once a week. It's how a chocaholic might feel getting a job in a chocolate shop but being forbidden from eating more than one truffle a week.

Testosterone is one of the primary hormones for regulating sex drive in both men and women, and for those with low levels in their system, sex desire can fade or become totally non-existent. So say a high-testosterone and low-testosterone person become attracted to one another – highly likely since opposites attract – during infatuation, with the help of the PEA (phenylethylamine, another elevating chemical released in the brain during this phase) and dopamine, the person with the low sex drive experiences a surge in sexual desire. Fabulous, you both think. But over time, the impact of these hormones fades and each of you returns to your normal level of sexual interest, leaving the highly sexed partner feeling duped and the low-sexed partner questioning themselves or the relationship.

I lived with a guy whose testosterone levels ought to have been monitored in the interests of medical research. He needed – as opposed to wanted – to have sex five

While a man's sexual potency is central to his masculinity; the idea of a woman whining for sex is seen as humiliating



times a day. He was also highly strung and a bit bossy, so I generally tended to succumb to his passes. Having believed that men become deranged and/or ill if you refuse to aid satisfaction, on a few occasions I laid there passively, my only contribution a plaintive cry, "Pull my nightie down when you've finished."

A sex manual I read years later stipulated that sex must only occur with desire and I determined never again to participate unless I had the urge. But as you get older, the men who want it five times a day become rarer while your testosterone levels match that of the 15-year-old lad.

So what happens when it's the man who has the headache? While 60 per cent of men would like more sex, the figure is 70 per cent for women. Cultural stereotypes make this direction of desire discrepancy unacceptable. A man's sexual potency is central to his masculinity; while the idea of a woman whining for sex is humiliating. A friend, Sally, kept dating men whose PEA and dopamine wore off very quickly. She did the whole stockings and suspenders thing but that brought only temporary relief. Shamingly, upon pestering the third boyfriend with apparently low levels of testosterone, she was gently told she was lousy in bed.

The person with the lower sex drive often dictates the frequency of sex and sees the gap in desire as their partner's problem. Curiously, these people realise their partner is sexually unhappy, have no intention of doing anything about it, yet still expect fidelity. ■

JONNY HANNAH