

“HEY DOC, CAN YOU KEEP

A SECRET

?

Your embarrassing health questions, answered



BY DANA SULLIVAN

bothersome bladder problems, alarming odors, hair growing in all the wrong places. We all have issues that we're too embarrassed to bring up with anyone—including our doctors. But rest assured, your doc has heard it all before. "It's our job to help you, not judge you," says Laura Dean, MD, a spokeswoman for the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists who practices in Stillwater, Minnesota. Still, inquiring about a delicate health problem can be uncomfortable. That's why we decided to start the conversation for you by asking experts to address six common blush-worthy complaints. PLEASE TURN TO 136

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I brush and floss twice a day but I still have bad breath. Why?



A You may be forgetting a crucial factor: your tongue. Since bad-breath-causing bacteria and plaque can build up there, use a tongue scraper once or twice a day. And make sure to get the back of your tongue in particular, since that's where plaque tends to accumulate, says dentist Catrise Austin, DDS, author of *5 Steps to the Hollywood A-List Smile*. Chewing sugar-free gum (look for the ingredient xylitol, which helps inhibit the growth of bacteria) can also help a little, as can chewing on mint leaves or parsley or drinking cardamom, anise or peppermint tea—they're all natural breath sweeteners, says Dr. Austin. And of course, you'll want to steer clear of foods like garlic and onions; their pungent oils can haunt your breath for up to three days!

If none of that works, see your dentist. You may have gum disease, a cavity or an abscess. But if your dentist doesn't detect an oral health problem—or if whatever treatment she suggests doesn't help within a few months—you may need to see a gastroenterologist. About 10 percent of chronic bad breath problems stem from digestive problems such as ulcers, acid reflux and lactose intolerance. Another possible cause: a sinus infection, in which the sinuses become inflamed and mucus may drip into the throat. If that's the case, an ear, nose and throat (ENT) doctor can help you get the right treatment.

A Blame genetics and hormones. Some women—especially those of Middle Eastern, South Asian and Mediterranean descent—naturally have thick, coarse hair. But even those who used to be relatively smooth-faced tend to get hairier starting in perimenopause (usually in your 40s), thanks to hormonal shifts, says Dr. Badreshia-Bansal. If you're younger than 40 or you're also breaking out a lot, however, you could have a thyroid problem or polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS).

Why am I suddenly sprouting a mustache and a beard?

PCOS is a condition in which the ovaries make excess amounts of androgens (male hormones that women also make), and it may increase your risk of infertility and

diabetes. Your doctor should order blood tests to figure out if you have PCOS or a thyroid disorder and treat you accordingly.

There are many ways you can remove facial hair. But if you're thinking about laser removal, know that it will only work well if your hair is dark, because lasers target pigment, says Dr. Badreshia-Bansal. Another option: Vaniqa. This prescription cream can help thin out hair by targeting an enzyme that's involved in hair growth.



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I can't wear black because my dandruff is so bad, but "dandruff shampoo" doesn't help. What will?



A Try alternating products with different active ingredients, says Cynthia Bailey, MD, a California-based dermatologist. Zinc pyrithione (Selsun Salon and Head & Shoulders) has anti-yeast properties; ketoconazole (Nizoral) is an antifungal and anti-yeast; coal tar (Neutrogena T/Gel) and selenium sulfide (Selsun Blue Medicated and Head & Shoulders Clinical Strength) slow the production of skin cells; and salicylic acid (Neutrogena T/Sal) scrubs the scalp. Dr. Bailey recommends buying two or three

of these and switching every time you wash. She also recommends sudsing up first with a regular shampoo to dissolve oil and product buildup so the medicine will penetrate better. Then apply the dandruff shampoo directly to your scalp and let it sit for about 5 minutes. You should see noticeable improvement within one month. If not, see a dermatologist, since you may need a stronger prescription remedy (such as a steroid solution or foam).

If you're looking for a more natural fix, try coating your scalp with warm mineral oil or peanut oil, then use a fine-tooth comb to loosen flakes before shampooing, says Dr. Bailey. Tea tree oil shampoos (sold in health food stores) can also be effective.

Whatever you do, make sure you shampoo as often as possible (ideally every day). "People with dandruff tend to wash their hair less frequently because they assume the condition is caused by dryness, but it's not," says Bruce Robinson, MD, clinical instructor of dermatology at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City. An overgrowth of yeast may be to blame, but experts say that people who have it generally have an oily scalp, which can allow dead skin cells to accumulate and flake off. ✿

DANA SULLIVAN writes about health and fitness from her home in Reno, Nevada. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *O: The Oprah Magazine* and *Real Simple*.