UAE Skin Specialist Draws Attention to Emotionally Debilitating Condition

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A Dubai-based skin specialist has spoken out to draw attention to a condition that affects a large number of women in the UAE, but nevertheless receives little public recognition. Dr. Radha Lachhiramani, a Clinical Dermatologist at the Imperial Health Institute in Dubai HealthCare City, says that 'hirsutism' - the excessive growth of body hair - is a medical disorder that is commonly found in women across the region and is one that she regularly encounters in her practice. She reveals that although not life-threatening, the disorder is often responsible for severe psychological problems and can impact negatively on patients' relationships, causing anguish and distress.

"Female hirsutism is frequently seen in this part of the world and there is a high incidence of the condition in the UAE," says Dr. Radha. "I am regularly involved in consultations with women who understandably experience a great deal of emotional distress when they have this disorder. The distribution of hair in female hirsutism occurs in a typically male pattern and it may be pigmented and thick. It will be particularly obvious when on the facial areas of the upper lip, neck and chin, so you can see how this can be terribly upsetting for a woman," she added.

According to Dr. Radha, the main causes for female hirsutism in the UAE are genetics and insulin resistance; the latter meaning that the body's cells are unable to take up glucose effectively. The genetic aspect of the condition is associated with Middle Eastern ethnicity; something that is termed 'familial' hirsutism. Insulin resistance is a feature of obesity, which is widespread throughout the UAE, as well as a hormonal disorder called Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOD). In one study of 102 women in the UAE with hirsutism, 93 were diagnosed with PCOD.

"The main factors for hirsutism in the large number of women I see are a combination of Middle Eastern ancestry and insulin resistance and while the resulting excessive hair growth in itself is not life threatening, the underlying medical condition can be," said Dr. Radha. "Obesity is well-established as a chronic health problem that leads onto a host of other serious illnesses and the conditions causing hormonal imbalances can also be potentially deadly," she added.

Dr. Radha says that although hirsutism can cause so much distress, its treatment is relatively straightforward and should comprise lifestyle and dietary changes, as well as mechanical hair removal.

"As hirsutism can be related to high insulin levels in obesity, it is important to eat a diet that controls the levels of insulin in the body," she advises. "Examples of these types of food include wholegrain bread, brown rice, oats, beans and lentils, hummus, sweetcorn, fruit and berries and low fat milk and yoghurt," she adds. "If a hormonal disorder is the underlying cause, tofu and soy products, as well as beans, lentils and flax seeds, contain 'phytoestrogens' which can help

balance hormone levels and make male hormones less readily available to the body. Exercise is also important as this helps to burn off calories and keep body weight within its normal range," she adds.

If a patient's hirsutism is due to a hormonal disorder, they will often be prescribed hormonal-based medication to slow down its growth. But while medical treatment can be successful in decreasing or at least slowing down the growth, it cannot get rid of the existing unwanted hair. Mechanical hair removal techniques must be undertaken to achieve this and these include tweezing, waxing, shaving, depilation, topical creams and laser treatment, with the latter proving to be more and more popular.

"Laser therapy is rapidly becoming the treatment of choice for hair removal since it first became available in 1995," says Dr. Radha. "It works by specifically targeting the natural pigment melanin in the hair follicle. The melanin absorbs the light and converts into heat, which destroys the follicle. Laser treatment provides an advanced, relatively safe and long lasting procedure that also shows quick results," she added.

Dr. Radha believes that although societal attitudes have progressed significantly towards an acceptance of medical disorders that distort perceptions of gender, there is still room for improvement.

"In the 19th century in the west, women with hirsutism were regarded as freaks and often featured in circus shows as 'bearded ladies,' with people paying money to be morbidly fascinated by them," she says. "Thankfully, due to advances in science, we now know that these conditions have a medical basis and we can treat them effectively. However, with an ever present media influence that tries to sell us the ideals for beauty, there is still room for an improvement in attitudes. We need to understand that conditions such as hirsutism can challenge the very core of femininity and what it means to be a woman," she added.