To shave or not to shave [1]

Dear Alice,

I am a new foreign student here in the U.S. from Europe. There, girls don't shave legs or underarm hair. Now, every girl here tells me that I had to shave, should I? I basically don't really want to.

? Christine

Answer

Dear Christine,

Welcome to the United States! It may be a culture shock to learn about Americans' obsession with hair removal. A walk down the beauty aisle in any store reveals just how deep this obsession runs, with the display of a wide variety of shaving creams, razors, waxes, depilatories, and bleaches. Many women in the United States do shave or wax their legs and underarms, but it is important for you to know that not everyone does.

As a foreign student, it can be difficult to find your place at a new school and in a new cultural community. It's natural to make some changes in your lifestyle and appearance in order to "fit in." At the same time, you don't want to completely lose your own identity. If not shaving is something you're unwilling to give up, then you don't have to. This is a choice, not a requirement.

You may want to consider the following tidbits about shaving:

- If you shave, it may feel like your hair to grows back coarser, because the hair shaft will have a blunt tip. Some people describe a "prickly" feeling when hair is growing back after shaving.
- Hair usually grows back within a day or several days after shaving. In order to maintain hair-free legs and underarms, shaving can become a lifelong time commitment that causes some women to feel like a "slave to the razor." Removing your hair by waxing, on the other hand, only needs to be done every four to six weeks.

In the big picture, the issue of shaving is an example of the more global issue of cultural acceptance and cross-cultural communication. As a foreign student, you are, in a sense, an ambassador. This means you have both the opportunity and responsibility to educate your American friends and family about your country's culture? the norms and traditions that you
grew up with and are accustomed to (just as your host family and American friends have a responsibility to teach you about the United States). Not only will they learn about your country, but it will also give them insight into you as a person and help them understand you better. You can also learn quite a bit about yourself and your own culture when you examine certain actions, behaviors, and ways of doing things that you have always accepted as "normal," but that seem "different" in your host country. There's nothing inherently wrong with shaving or not shaving; these are simply two different ways of doing things. This is an important lesson for everyone to learn.

The subtle (and not so subtle) cultural differences are part of what make us unique individuals. We need to cherish and celebrate some of our differences; they make the world a much more interesting place in which to live and explore!

Wishing you a successful and enjoyable experience in the U.S.!
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