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! As you've pointed out, different cultures may have different standards for beauty. It may be a shock to learn about the hair removal practice so prevalent in the United States; a walk down any beauty aisle reveals a wide variety of shaving creams, razors, waxes, depilatories, and bleaches. Despite the focus on hair removal, not everyone shaves or waxes their legs and underarms. Ultimately, you have the choice to do with your hair what you want.

As an international student, it may be challenging to become comfortable at a new school and in a new cultural community. That being the case, it's natural to make some changes in your lifestyle and appearance in order to "fit in." At the same time, you may want to balance that with aspects of your own identity. If shaving isn't something you feel comfortable with or are interested in, then you may decide not to do it ? it's a choice, not a requirement.

If you do choose to shave your legs, there are a few things that are helpful to know. Once you shave, the hair will eventually grow back, typically within a day or several days. In order to maintain hair-free legs and underarms, shaving can become a long-term time commitment that causes some people to feel like they're stuck or have to plan around it. As the hair grows back, it may appear that the hair is growing back thicker. However, it's worth mentioning that it may seem that way because the hair shaft has a blunt tip, not because it becomes coarser after shaving. Another removal option you may try is waxing. This method can last anywhere from four to six weeks and doesn't usually result in the same prickly feeling associated with shaving.

As you ponder your decision to shave or not, it may be an opportunity to consider why people in your home country don't remove leg or underarm hair. Are there certain values associated with not shaving? Is the practice rooted in certain health beliefs or cultural customs? How do
you personally feel about these values or beliefs? Reflecting on these questions may help inform a thoughtful discussion with your friends about shaving and hair removal when and if it comes up again. But, then again, you don’t have to explain your choice if you don’t feel comfortable. To further the conversation, you may also ask your friends why they choose to shave their legs and underarms. It’s possible that they haven’t really thought about it themselves and this may present an opportunity for them to do so.

Taking some time to consider these various perspectives may help clarify your decision. That said, the choice you make for yourself is likely the best one for you. Good luck and here’s to an enjoyable experience in the United States!

Alice!
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