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## Laser clinics zapping all the way to the bank

**Ideal Image will expand to meet demand for the fashionable hairless look. Watch for one in Brandon in September.**

By STEPHANIE HAYES, Times Staff Writer  
Published August 26, 2005

Dean Akers has a theory for why the company he runs is popular.

"Going back to biblical times, women with beards have not been fashionable," said Akers, chief executive officer of Ideal Image Laser Hair Removal.

Ideal Image customers want the fuzzy stuff gone. Gone from the back, legs, face, underarms, and even from unmentionable regions.

The company's marketing materials feature beautiful people with baby-quality skin, hair gracing just the right places. The rest has been zapped by lasers that target each hair from the follicle, stopping growth in its tracks.

Akers said the technique is here to stay. The 3-year-old company will open 50 shops throughout the United States by year's end, plus one in Sydney, Australia.

A clinic opened in New Tampa in May. In Brandon, another is set to open in mid September at 1602 Oakfield Drive, Suite 105. Akers says the flood of new locations reflects the demand.

"The industry, as best we can tell, is close to a \$3-billion sales industry in the U.S.," Akers said.

Ideal Image's look is sleek, sophisticated and modern. Frosted signs bearing the company's black and white logo decorate office walls. Natural light floods in from everywhere.

It's the hip answer to shaving with Colgate foam, a more permanent alternative to yanking out hair with wax strips and tweezers.

"This is not a cosmetic trend," he said. "It's all about technology that's allowing something that people have been dealing with for thousands of years to be dealt with in just a more efficient manner."

Ideal Image has performed more than 100,000 procedures in Florida. Removal of women's facial hair is the company's most requested procedure.

Julia Wright said Ideal Image saved her from daily shearing of splotches of dark neck hair.

"I was plucking. Then I was shaving and plucking. Then I was actually scarring," said Wright, 33, of Carrollwood.

Her husband gave her laser hair removal treatments as a birthday gift. Now

My kid will  
be home at  
?  
today.



she's hooked. She has since had procedures on her upper lip, cheeks, underarms and bikini line.

"I would love to go head to toe one day," she said.

Laser hair removal isn't an in-and-out fix, like a salon wax. It takes about five sessions eight to 10 weeks apart to permanently stop hair growth.

Nor is it cheap. Procedures can range from \$300 to treat a "unibrow" to \$4,400 for a woman's full legs or a man's back and shoulders.

"Twenty percent of our base is male," Akers said, adding that many female clients urge the men in their lives to lose their ruglike chest hair at Ideal Image.

Laser hair removal isn't for everyone. Because the laser targets pigment in the hair, people with blond, gray, white or light red hair can't have the procedure.

"There probably will never be a laser that will do blond hair," said Ideal Image medical director Robert Ailes.

By latching on to the pigment, the laser kills the hair follicle cells that cause hair to regrow. Tweezing and waxing pull hair out by the root, but the cells still thrive.

Ailes compared the pain of laser hair removal to snapping a rubber band against the skin, and said that many people can stand the procedure without any pain-numbing medication.

"The areas that are padded on your body with muscles or fat are relatively insensitive to the laser," he said.

Some people opt to use a numbing cream, which has brought a wave of recent media attention.

In April, ABC's Primetime Live reported on 22-year-old North Carolina State University student Shiri Berg, who died in January after applying a large amount of compounded numbing cream on her lower body to prepare for laser hair removal.

Berg wrapped her legs in plastic to increase the cream's effect. She didn't have a prescription for the cream, given to her by the local spa performing the procedure.

"That lady was instructed to put numbing cream on from her waist to her toes," Ailes said. "That's far too large an area."

Ailes said that no Ideal Image patient has ever had a problem more serious than a minor rash. Ideal Image clients are told to limit their application of a triple anesthetic cream mixed at the Compounding Shop, a St. Petersburg pharmacy. Ideal Image prescribes the cream but does not dispense it to patients.

"If a woman is having full legs done, we tell her to put the numbing cream on from her knees down," he said. "You don't need it on your thighs."

Done properly, laser hair removal is extremely safe, practitioners say.

Akers said the company plans to open 50 clinics per year, and by 2008 turn Ideal Image into a publicly owned company.

"It's a unique business in the fact that when your guests come in, they leave happy," Akers said. "You've done something to change their life."

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