

1 **Human (lack of) hair**

2 original at

3 <http://www.economist.com/node/21541808>

4 Much ink has been spilled on the question of human hairlessness: This
5 lack of hair has been attributed to everything from a putative aquatic
6 period in the species's past to the advantages of displaying a healthy skin
7 to members of the opposite sex.

8 Less attention has been paid, though, to the fact that humans are not
9 really hairless at all. Per square centimetre, human skin has as many hair
10 follicles as that of other great apes. The difference is not in the number,
11 but in the fineness of the hair that grows from those follicles. These fine
12 human hairs do not seem to be performing any of the functions of hair in
13 more hirsute species (insulation and, through colouration, either signalling
14 or camouflage). So what are they for?

15 Two British scientists, Ms Dean and Dr Siva-Jothy, tested the idea that
16 fine body hairs are there to alert their owner to creepy crawlies such as
17 bed bugs. They managed to recruit 29 eager volunteers from among
18 students for the experiment. Each had a patch of skin on one arm shaved,
19 marked with a pen and surrounded by petroleum jelly (to fence the bed
20 bugs in), and a patch on the other marked and surrounded, but not
21 shaved.

22 Volunteers were asked to look away while a researcher put a bug on one
23 of the skin patches. The volunteer was then supposed to record, using a
24 press-button counter, the number of times he perceived the insect moving
25 on his skin. The difference was significant. When the bug was on a hairy
26 patch it was detected, on average, every four seconds. When it was on a
27 shaved patch, more than ten seconds elapsed between detections.

28 The conclusion is that human fine body hair seems to serve as an alarm
29 system.

Questions

- 1) How has the apparent hairlessness of humans been explained in the past?
- 2) Are humans indeed hairless?
- 3) What is the difference between human hair and the hair of the great apes?
- 4) What sort of explanation for the function of hair do the scientists provide?
- 5) Of what did the experiment mentioned in the article consist?
- 6) What did the experiment show?
- 7) Do you think that experiments like those mentioned in the article have any impact on real life? Do you think that they should be funded by the government?
- 8) What is your attitude to hair and facial hair? Do you think facial hair is attractive in men?

Vocabulary

putative (line 5) – commonly regarded as such; reputed; supposed: the putative boss of the mob

follicles (line 10) – (anatomy), a small cavity, sac, or gland.

hirsute (line 13) – covered with long, rather stiff hairs

creepy crawlies (line 16) – a creeping or crawling animal, especially an insect.

You can find additional explanation and more examples to help you understand and use English words and phrases at <http://dictionary.reference.com>, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/> or <http://www.ldoceonline.com/>

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