

Body shaving maximizes your feel for the water and trims your times too

By Alex Kostich

“Do you shave your entire body?”

So goes one of the most frequently asked questions that a swimmer must endure when talking to a non-aquatic inquiring mind. As trivial and prurient a question as it can be (depending on who is asking it, and why), there is a lot to be said for the importance of a pre-race shave.

While most recreational swimmers could not be bothered, world-class swimmers depend on their once- or twice-annual full-body shave to, well, shave seconds off their times.

Regardless of your ability in the pool, you may want to consider trying the process, as the full-body shave can add a psychological — and not just a refreshingly physical — boost to your racing.

Triathletes & cyclists shave out of necessity: Should they fall off their bikes and skid on the road, their body hair acts like Velcro when it contacts the pavement, hooking into the road and tearing out patches of skin. Smooth legs allow for slicker, slipperier contact with the ground, allowing one to escape less-scathed in a spill.

For swimmers, the importance of shaving also ties into slicker, smoother benefits.

Over at the [Homely Scientist](#), in an article on [Smoothed Particle Hydrodynamics](#) and the use of mathematics was used in an effort to better understand how water interacts with the human body during competitive swimming.

Tris writes that “it’s all about [laminar flow](#). While runners, bikers, and other athletes have to consider wind resistance, swimmers have to have a totally different side of physics to consider.”

According to Tris: Laminar flow is basically it’s how a fluid (in this case water) passes over and around an object. Anything that resists the flow slows things down, it’s like friction, but a little different. The key thing with water is that interruptions in the flow causes ripples and eddies that sap power as well. I dated some swimmer in the past and they actually let their body hair grow in practice time, making them work harder for their times, then for meets shave. Even the feeling, they said, of being that smooth and the difference in the way the water flowed over their bodies made them feel faster. Of course it actually does. (Scott Goldblatt)

While the removal of hairs is definitely helpful in making one’s body more aerodynamic in the water, the another purpose of shaving is to remove the thin layer of dead skin cells that coat the outer layer of the epidermis.

This reveals fresher, more sensitive cells and results in a heightened feel for the water. While the body is constantly shedding its top layer of dead skin cells anyway, the use of a razor speeds up the process and removes cells all at once, not a few at a time. As anyone can attest, putting on a pair of jeans or getting under the sheets after a fresh full-body shave is a refreshing sensation that translates into feeling faster in the water.

The first step in a good shave is identifying a brand of disposable razors and shaving cream. Simple Gillette double-blade razors are inexpensive and much more effective than single-blades (as the TV commercials indicate, the second blade picks up any stray hairs that the first blade misses and leaves your skin smooth and is less likely to cut you).

As far as shaving creams go, a menthol-scented cream works best: The menthol has a cooling effect on your skin and intensifies the sensation of a new shave. If you have sensitive skin, Edge Gel for Sensitive Skin will help you avoid razor burn, although it doesn't leave you feeling as alert and refreshed as the menthol-based cream. While none of this is really rocket science, there are details to note if you plan on taking full advantage of a body shave. Eventually you will find the brands of items that work for you, but I suggest the double-bladed razors and menthol cream.

Depending on the extent of your hairiness nature, an efficient way to start your shave is to use clippers (those electric blades that barbers and sheep shearers use) to trim down the hair on your legs, chest, and arms. This saves time and spares razor blades, for to shave a pair of legs with full-grown hair can take up to four razors. Since you are not just shaving hair, but skin cells, the blades should always be new.

Once clipped, begin shaving your legs and arms. The most efficient way to shave is to practice a sawing motion, back and forth, against the grain of the hairs and then right back down with the grain. The up-stroke shaves the hairs, while the down-stroke cleans the razor off. The more traditional technique of rinsing the razor after each up-stroke is time-consuming and actually serves to dull the razor faster if you are rinsing it in warm water.

It is best to shave while sitting in a bathtub of warm water that you can constantly drain and refill; this way you stay warm and relaxed and avoid shivering, which results in tight muscles that can hinder your upcoming performance. Also, keep in mind that shaving is a lot like yoga; it can be strenuous as you contort your body into different positions to get every stray hair on the behind your knees and on the small of your back. Try not to strain yourself in one position too long, for this can also have a negative effect on your race. When possible, have a partner shave those hard-to-reach areas.

As odd as this may sound, don't forget to shave the bottom of your feet and the palms of your hands. World-class swimmers swear by this method of heightening the sensation of these extremities, and you will notice a marked difference in your feel for the water. Fear not, there are no documented cases of thicker hairs growing back: All you are doing is removing dulled, less-sensitive cells from your hands and feet.

At the end of your shave, a lukewarm shower to refresh your body and some basic stretching can loosen up any tightened back or shoulder muscles. The final step is to dry off and splash your newly smooth skin with some rubbing alcohol. This serves two purposes: It opens up your pores and refreshes them even more than the menthol cream did, and it sterilizes any cuts or pores that could become host to painful ingrown hairs. If your skin looks scaly when dry, you can spread a light coat of lotion over yourself for added moisture.

The best time to shave is generally the night before your race. Allow yourself at least 90 minutes to do the job completely, and avoid swimming until your warm-up the next morning. The sensation you feel with a new shave is short-lived as your newly exposed cells begin to dry up and die off, so you should avoid the water and save yourself for warm-up and the race itself.

Once the race is over, the sensation of a close shave will wear off within a week, but if you are competing again soon you can re-shave and it will still feel like your first time. A re-shave should also be done using new razors, but instead of going against the grain of your hairs, be sure to shave across the grain this time, left to right. This way you skim off the dead skin cells while not going over fresh hair stubble that, if aggravated by a razor, will cause ingrown hairs.

Because of the unique and short-lived sensation that a full-body shave provides, it's recommended that you only enjoy the process once a season, and no more than three times a year.