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MALE CALL: Top-notch creams offer smoother, cleaner shave

BY LOIS FENTON

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LITTLE ROCK — Q. I love your column. This e-mail thing is new to me; please forgive. You did an article on shaving awhile back, but I don't remember all that you wrote. I am a black man with sensitive skin who has tried every shave cream I can think of, but I still get some razor burn and razor bumps. Please advise. Thank you.

A. For men who have no shaving difficulties, most normal brands of shaving cream are fine. The best advice for men with sensitive skin is to upgrade your shave products. Avoid the typical drugstore shaving creams because a lot of them are aerosol-based. Their foam version creates air pockets that lift the product off of your skin, which means you have to go back and shave over the same area a couple of times, causing rawness and irritation. This won't happen with the top-notch brands, which are not break-the-bank expensive (they usually range from \$12 to \$25).

As you have discovered, black men often have more trouble with shaving because their hair can be coarser and curlier, resulting in ingrown hairs. They need first-rate shaving products that help produce a close shave, instead of leaving a little bit of stubble which can then curl back on itself and turn into ingrown hairs. By using an especially effective shaving cream, a sharp razor, hot water, and shaving in the direction of your hair's growth, you will minimize cuts, irritation, ingrown hairs and razor burn, and achieve a smooth shave.

Here is a three-step system to achieve a close, clean shave: Prepare your face, shave and then moisturize. Always wash your face before you shave. Warm, moisten and soften the skin with a hot shower, and you can shave in the shower (fogless shavingmirrors are widely available at reasonable prices). Or shave shortly after showering so the steam has time to moisten and soften the whiskers.

Several quality companies have complete lines of outstanding men's skincare and shaving products. Among the best are Jack Black, Kiehl's, American Crew and Organic Grooming. Try more than one system to find the one that works best for you. One no-foam shaving cream from Jack Black, called Beard Lube, is a 3-in-1 product: a pre-shave oil, shaving cream and skin conditioner all in one. More technologically advanced than traditional products, the clear shave-cream texture has no foam; it's more of a translucent lotion so a man with facial hair or one who shaves his head has a clear view and can get welldefined lines. Its unique lubricating ingredients (two pre-shave oils and glycerin) are built in to reduce razor burn and bumps. The formula is fragrance-free, alcohol-free and colorant-free - ideal for those with sensitive skin.

Another Jack Black product, Clear Complexion Solution, contains salicylic acid, which helps exfoliate skin. By getting rid of the top layer of dead skin, the hair can be cut off clean. Both products are available at upscale retailers and specialty stores, such as Neiman-Marcus, Nordstrom, Sephora and some Saks Fifth Avenues and Bloomingdale's. Their Web site is www.getjackblack.com.

The two most-popular shaving products from the highly respected company Kiehl's are the Ultimate Brushless Shave Cream-White Eagle and the nonoily moisturizer, Facial Fuel. The shave cream is concentrated so you need very little; the thin layer makes it ideal for men with mustaches, goatees and other types of facial hair. Kiehl's products can be found in better retailers and online at www.Kiehls.com.

If you're not using a seethrough shaving product, it's wise to use a shaving brush rather than your fingers to

generate a rich lather. American Crew advocates applying their Herbal Shave Cream with a brush, used in a circular motion. Always shave with a clean, very sharp razor. Close the pores with cool water and lightly pat the skin dry. Hydrate and protect your skin with After Shave Moisturizer. Ending with a moisturizer protects the skin from rawness, irritation and the damaging effects of weather and pollution.

Organic Grooming makes a unique line of products that are free of dyes and synthetics. Vegan, certified-organic ingredients and recyclable packaging are part of the company's commitment to healthy skin and a healthy environment. Because their Shave Cream has no sulphates (which tend to create a fluffy lather), you get a good clean shave. The After Shave Balm is a soothing skin conditioner. Both are available at www.organic-grooming.com.

Other important advice about shaving: Besides shaving with - not against - the grain of your beard, it is essential to change the blade frequently. That's why a barbershop shave is so smooth. The barber sharpens his singleedge blade before each use. Every once in awhile, it might be a nice idea to treat yourself to a professional shave by a barber.

Q. When I get my dress shirts back from the cleaner's, the starch seems to be slowly ruining them. In addition, the collars have developed some type of stain (perhaps from the cleaning solution?), and I often have to replace the small sleeve buttons on the cuffs. Am I better off only having the shirts laundered and pressed, omitting the starch?

A. I think you are better off finding another dry cleaner. Yours seems to be taking too little care in laundering and using too much pressure when ironing your shirts. While it's true that starch does take more of a toll on shirts than "no starch," having shirts starched should not cause such havoc.

If you prefer your shirts to be starched, a top-quality laundry should be able to accommodate you. The finer establishments take your order seriously for "no starch," "light starch," "medium starch" or "heavy starch." Heavier starch tends to break down the fibers more, especially on the fold of a French cuff and on the collar at the back of the neck. (When a shirt is frayed only at the back of the neck, it is not caused by abrasion from a man's stubble, but rather from folding and breaking the fabric of the stiffened - starched - collar.) Keep in mind that, as with hamburgers, "having it your way" may not come as inexpensively as the one-way-fits-all type of service.

In previous years, a few readers have berated me for my remarks about seeking out and patronizing a top-quality (and therefore, more expensive) dry cleaner. When I have written about my preference for professional cleaners who carefully stuff the sleeves of pressed garments with tissue paper and provide other refined services as well, these readers have complained that they would rather take their dry-cleaned garments off of the wire hangers and rehang them at home than pay the extra cost for such meticulous service. That is certainly a person's right. But I don't agree. I choose my clothes carefully and want them to look new for a long time. I believe the professional cleaner/laundrer who takes extra time packaging my garment is not doing so as a cosmetic device. He also carefully pre-spots garments before cleaning them, uses more-expensive cleaning fluids, changes the fluids more frequently, hires more skilled pressers, and generally provides better - and more knowledgeable - overall care and service. I think his slightly higher prices are a worthwhile expenditure.

Along those same lines, to answer your question about the stains your shirts have developed on the collar, my dry cleaner tells me that they have nothing to do with starching and everything to do with the cleaning and bleaching solutions your cleaner uses.

Incidentally, really good laundries do not press shirts so the sleeve buttons get broken or knocked off. But if, on occasion, this does happen, the laundry should automatically replace the button without your request or even without your knowledge.

Send your questions for Male Call to:

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