

DEALING WITH HAIR LOSS

Hair loss or 'alopecia' is a very common side effect of many chemotherapy regimes and radiotherapy treatment to the head. There are many things you can do to manage this often distressing experience that allow you to feel that you have some control over the process. This tip sheet answers some of the most commonly asked questions about hair loss. It is important to do what feels right for you rather than what other people tell you to do.

Why does it happen?

Cancer treatments that cause hair loss target rapidly dividing cells. This means not only cancer cells, but also other rapidly dividing cells such as hair follicles. The hair on your head grows fastest and so you will lose it first, but it is possible to lose all of your body hair, including your pubic hair, your eyelashes and eyebrows. Often people are prepared to lose hair on their hair but don't realise that they may lose all of their hair. Hair loss is distressing for most men and women.

What can I do to prepare?

It can help to have a plan for how you are going to deal with your hair loss. This helps increase your sense of being in control. The plan should include the following:

- Pamper your hair while you have it. Use a mild shampoo and pat dry rather than rubbing with a towel. If you blow-dry, use a low heat. Brush your hair gently and don't put it into ponytails or braids. Don't perm or straighten your hair just before treatment. Some people find sleeping on a satin pillowcase reduces friction and allows them to keep their hair longer.
- Plan how you will manage losing hair. Choose wigs or alternative head coverings before you need them. If you are choosing a wig, selecting one before you lose your hair can help you match the colour and style. Make it fun; take a friend for the outing. There are many bandanas and scarves available in stores and online.
- Think about cutting your hair shorter or shaving it all off. This can help increase your sense of control. Shorter hair doesn't appear to fall out as quickly as long hair, and it can help in the transition from your usual hairstyle to short hair before no hair. If you decide to shave your head, be prepared for this to be an emotional experience. If you go to the hairdressers, ask if you have it done out of normal hours.

What happens when it falls out?

Hair usually starts to fall out two to three weeks after starting treatment. It usually only takes a few days to fall out completely. It might fall out in strands or in clumps. It is not unusual to wake up with a lot of hair on your pillow, to pull out big clumps when brushing your hair, or to find that you have washed your hair 'off' in the shower!

- Your scalp may be tender or itchy. If it is summer and you are wearing a wig, you may find that it causes a heat rash. If this is the case try to expose your head to the open air

as much as possible. Wearing a cotton cap between your scalp and the wig can help stop the rash (and it soaks up the sweat!). Snug-fitting cotton caps are also good for sleeping in winter when your head is likely to get cold.

- Don't forget to protect your scalp when you are in the sun. The skin is sensitive and sunburn is very painful.
- Using an eyebrow pencil and stencil can hide losing your eyebrows. False eyelashes can be useful, but they are fiddly and most women would rather use an eyeliner to hide the fact that they have no eyelashes. Our eyelashes protect our eyes from grit and dust in the air so it is important to wear sunglasses when you are outside, and carry artificial tears in case something does irritate your eye.
- It can help to see hair loss as part of the transition from a person who has cancer to a person who had cancer. Your hair falling out is proof that the treatment is harming rapidly dividing cells. The new hair that you grow is symbolic of your recovery and of becoming the new you, a cancer survivor.

What about when it grows back?

Your new hair might have a slightly different texture and/or colour. These changes may only last a few months or they may be permanent. The new hair is usually soft, fine and very healthy. Over time, it thickens. However, it is just as strong as your old hair, and as long as you give it a few cuts to keep it short and allow it to thicken, there is no reason you can't colour and perm it as you did in the past. It may take about six months to get to this stage.

Extracted from: Adams, Catherine, 'Coping with Common Concerns' in Hodgkinson, Dr Katharine; Gilchrist, Dr Jemma (eds), *Psychosocial Care of Cancer Patients: A Health Professional's Guide to What to Say and Do*, Ausmed Publications (2008, Melbourne), 86, 87.

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