

Hair Loss

Hair loss (alopecia) due to chemotherapy can be one of the most distressing side effects you can face during treatment. This information sheet aims to provide helpful information and support about the causes of hair loss and the management and solutions available to you.

Chemotherapy and hair loss

Hair loss occurs because chemotherapy targets all rapidly dividing cells, not only the cancer cells but healthy cells as well. Hair follicles (the structures in the skin filled with tiny blood vessels that make our hair) are some of the fastest growing cells in our body. Healthy hair follicles divide every 23-72 hours, which makes these cells particularly susceptible to chemotherapy.

It is important to know that not all chemotherapy will cause hair loss. Whether your hair remains as it is or thins or falls out depends on the type of drugs and dosages your doctor has prescribed. There are various classes of chemotherapy drugs that all produce different reactions along with your own individual response to the chemotherapy.

The timing of your treatments can also affect hair loss. Some types of chemotherapy are given weekly and in smaller doses and this minimises hair loss. Others are scheduled every three to four weeks in higher doses and are more likely to cause hair loss.

Hair loss may occur at any time during treatment but is more likely to happen within the first few weeks of starting chemotherapy. Occasionally, hair loss can start within a few days.

Hair loss may occur gradually or suddenly. Chemotherapy causes the hair to break off at the skin so the first thing you may be aware of is that you lose hair when it is brushed, combed or washed. When you wake in the morning, you may notice hair on your pillow and sheets.

Often your hair may come out in clumps rather than evenly. It is also common for hair loss to include eyelashes, eyebrows and even pubic hair.

Your feelings

Each person responds differently to finding out they will lose their hair. There is no right or wrong response. You may feel anxious about losing your hair and at times even distressed. These reactions are quite common and normal.

Hair loss may have a great influence on body image. It may have an impact on how you feel about yourself, and this in turn may have an impact on sexuality. Hair loss together

with fatigue and an increased dependence on others, may impact on roles within a family.

Hair loss is also one obvious sign to others that you are a 'cancer patient', which may impact on the way you feel. You need to share feelings with family and friends and use available resources to help you through this time.

There are many ways to help cope with hair loss. It is important to do what feels most comfortable for you.

Coping with hair loss

Being prepared and talking about how you feel with others can help you adjust to this temporary change in appearance. Keeping in close contact with friends, relatives, your doctor and nurses, or someone who has also shared this experience can be a helpful way of dealing with your emotions and thoughts about hair loss.

Support and advice is also available through the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20, Monday-Friday from 9am-5pm.

Some people consider cutting their hair short before treatment begins. Others find it helpful to cut their hair in stages so they have time to adjust. If you have children, it is also important to prepare them for this change.

Care of your hair and scalp during treatment

It is not uncommon for people to experience a degree of sensitivity and possible tenderness to their scalp prior to hair loss. It is important to protect and care for yourself throughout your treatment. Incorporating a healthy diet and lifestyle can also help the health of your hair and your recovery. Here is a list of suggestions that may be helpful throughout your treatment.

- Use a gentle shampoo and conditioner.
- Dry your hair naturally or use a cool setting on the hair dryer.
- Brush your hair gently, with a soft bristle brush.
- Protect your scalp from the sun.
- Avoid harsh chemicals such as hair colouring, gel, mousse and perming agents.
- Use a satin, polyester or cotton pillow case.
- Avoid heated rollers, curling wands or straightening irons.
- Gentle massage and conditioning of the scalp can be invigorating and reduce flaky dry areas.
- If you have lost hair under your arms avoid perfumed deodorants.

Some other tips

Draw attention away from your hair by highlighting other features:

- For women, a little extra make-up around the eyes, cheekbones or lips will direct attention to your face.
- Experiment with new colours for eyes and lips.
- Experiment with jewellery. Chains can emphasise the neckline while striking earrings can enhance a short hairstyle or look good with a hat or scarf.

It is important to do whatever feels comfortable and give you the most confidence, whether that means wearing hats, scarves and wigs or wearing nothing at all on your head.

Look Good.....Feel Better is a program for people having cancer treatment. The program provides valuable information about skincare, make-up and practical ways of dealing with hair loss during treatment. For further information talk to a social worker at the hospital or call the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20.

Radiation and hair loss

Radiation only causes hair loss on the particular part of the body being treated. For example, radiation to the brain usually causes complete hair loss on the head. Radiation to the armpit may cause hair loss in this area. After radiation treatment your hair will usually grow back but it may not be as thick as before. Depending on your dose of radiation and the length of treatment, it takes 6 to 12 months on average after treatment for the hair to grow back.

Will my hair grow back?

Hair loss is temporary for most people receiving chemotherapy. Usually when treatment is over the hair will start to grow back and this may happen even before your treatment has been completed.

The first hairs are usually very fine and they reappear within a month or six weeks of stopping treatment. Within three to six months you will probably have a full head of hair.

You may notice some changes in your hair when it grows back. For example, it may be more curly, thicker or finer than it was before. It may grow back a slightly different colour.

Wigs, turbans, scarves and hats

Dealing with hair loss is a very individual experience. Some people like to wear a wig while others find hats, scarves and turbans to be very comfortable and attractive. Deciding what is right for you is the most important thing.

Cancer Council ACT operates a Wig Service, which stocks a range of subsidised wigs, as well as turbans and other headwear. This operates from two locations, The Canberra Hospital and the Fairbairn office. For further information on the Wig Service or other wig and/or head wear providers call the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20 or Cancer Council ACT on 6257 9999.

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