



HAIR LOSS

DEFINITION

Nearly two out of every three men develop some form of balding, while an even higher percentage of men and women experience hair loss during their lives. Balding or sudden loss of hair is often very distressing. Some men associate a full head of hair with virility or youth; as the hairline recedes, men may feel a loss of youth or masculinity. Similarly, women whose hair thins with age may feel less desirable or attractive.

About 90% of a person's scalp hair is in a continual growth phase which lasts 2-3 years. Ten percent of the scalp hair is in a resting phase which lasts between 2-6 months. At the end of the hair's resting stage, the hair is shed. **Shedding 50 to 150 hairs a day is considered normal.** When a hair is shed, it is replaced by a new hair from the same follicle located just below the skin surface. No new follicles are formed during a person's lifetime. As people age, their rate of new hair growth diminishes, resulting in gradual thinning. This is normal for ALL men and women.

Abnormal hair loss can be due to a wide variety of causes. People who notice thinning or loss of hair should consult with a dermatologist who can determine if disease is present and whether or not the problem will respond to medical treatment. We will evaluate a patient's hair problem by asking questions about diet, medications, family history of hair loss, any recent illness, and care of the hair. We will ask female patients about menstrual cycle, pregnancies, abortions, and menopause. After examining the patient's scalp and hair, we may check hairs under the microscope. Laboratory blood tests may be required. Sometimes, a biopsy involving removal of a small piece of skin from the scalp may be necessary.

CAUSES OF HAIR LOSS

Childbirth can cause a form of hair loss called telogen effluvium. After delivery, many hairs enter the resting phase. Within 4-6 months after delivery, patients may see hair coming out in their brushes and combs. This increased shedding lasts between one and six months. The condition is self-limited and will reverse completely in most cases.

Surgery, high fever, or severe physical or mental **trauma** can also cause telogen effluvium. Patients may be shocked to see a lot of hair falling out about six weeks to three months after their surgery, illness, or trauma. Again, this is usually self-limited and normal hair growth returns with time.

Thyroid disease can cause diffuse thinning of the hair. Thyroid disease can be diagnosed by other clinical signs and symptoms along with simple laboratory tests. Associated hair loss may be reversible with proper treatment.

Protein malnutrition can be seen in patients who are vegetarians, those who go on crash diets, and patients suffering from eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa. When this occurs, a person's body will conserve protein by shifting growing hairs into the resting phase. Hair can be pulled out by the roots with relative ease. This condition is reversible and preventable by eating adequate amounts of protein.

Medications may cause reversible hair shedding. Examples of such drugs include antibiotics, blood thinners, anticonvulsants, anti-cancer drugs, anti-thyroid drugs, heavy metals, hormones, Cimetidine, beta blockers, amphetamines, antidepressants, high dose vitamin A, and others. A relatively small percentage of patients will experience hair loss. This is usually reversible if the medication is stopped or changed.

Cancer chemotherapy drugs cause hair cells to stop dividing. Hair shafts then become thin and break off as they emerge from the scalp. This phenomenon can occur one to three weeks after treatment. The patient may lose up to 90% of his or her scalp hair. Most patients regrow their hair after treatment ends.

Birth control pills contain two ingredients, estrogen and progestin. Women who lose hair while taking oral contraceptives are usually predisposed to hereditary hair thinning which is then accelerated by male hormone-like effects of some progestins. If this occurs, consult with your gynecologist about switching to another birth control pill. When one stops taking oral contraceptives, she may experience some hair shedding after two or three months which can continue for up to six months. This is similar to hair loss after pregnancy and corrects itself in time.

Low serum iron can be detected by simple laboratory tests and corrected by taking iron pills. Women who have heavy menstrual periods lose excess iron, occasionally causing hair loss. Men can also have iron deficiency due to poor diet. Patients with high serum iron, which occurs in liver disease, heavy alcohol use, or dietary irregularities, may also develop reversible hair loss.

Chronic illness may also cause hair loss. Patients with severe chronic illness may experience shedding indefinitely.

Alopecia areata is a type of hair loss in which hair is lost in smooth, round patches. It can occasionally result in complete loss of hair on the scalp and other areas of the body. The disease affects males or females in any age group and the cause is unknown. In some cases, the hair regrows spontaneously. Alopecia areata responds well to dermatologic therapy including cortisone shots and creams.

Pattern baldness, or hereditary thinning or balding, is the **MOST COMMON** cause of thinning hair in both men and women. The trait can be inherited from either the mother's or father's side of the family. Women with this inherited tendency develop thin hair, but do not usually become bald. Medically, the condition is called androgenetic alopecia and may start as early as the teens or much later in life. There is no cure. Creative hairstyling can often mask thinning. In some men, hair transplants can redistribute the remaining hair. In women, hair transplantation is less satisfactory and wigs or partial hair pieces are usually preferred. A topical medicine, Rogaine, may help a small percentage of men and women with this condition. A pill called Propecia may also help stabilize and reverse genetic alopecia in men. Both Rogaine and Propecia must be used forever if you wish to maintain results.

Ringworm of the scalp, caused by fungal infection, begins with small patches of scaling that can spread and result in broken hair. This contagious disease occurs mostly in children and is treated with oral medication.

Traumatic hair care & styling such as tight braiding, flat ironing, and harsh chemicals can damage hair. Dyes, tints, bleaches, straighteners and permanent waves can weaken and break hair if applied too frequently, left on too long, or if multiple treatments are performed on the same day. If hair becomes too porous and brittle from overexposure, it is wise to stop the cosmetic procedure until the hair has grown out.

Shampooing, combing, and brushing are all necessary for proper hair and scalp care. But, if done improperly or excessively, these procedures can cause hair to break and split. A cream rinse or conditioner may be used after shampooing to make hair more manageable. Excess water should be blotted with a towel, not rubbed back and forth. Hair structure is more fragile when wet, so take care to avoid vigorous combing and brushing. Also, use wide-toothed combs and brushes with smooth tips.

Hairstyles that put tension on hair, like ponytails and braids, should be alternated with looser hairstyles to avoid constant traction that causes hair loss, especially on the sides of the scalp.

DIAGNOSIS

The proper treatment of alopecia lies in correct diagnosis. Remember, **most hair shedding is due to the normal hair cycle and losing 50-150 hairs per day is no cause for alarm.** If you are concerned about excessive hair loss or dramatic thinning, contact your dermatologist for evaluation. Some forms of hair loss can regrow spontaneously or with proper treatment. Unfortunately, there are several forms of hair loss for which there is no cure at present time.

