



## **ALOPECIA AREATA**

### **DEFINITION**

Alopecia areata is a condition in which round patches of hair is lost from areas of the body, usually the scalp. The hair-growing tissue suddenly stops making hair and the hair then falls out from the roots. The cause is not known, but it is felt to represent an autoimmune disease (where the body's immune system attacks itself). Alopecia areata is not contagious and not caused by allergies or foods. It occasionally runs in families.

Alopecia areata has three stages. First, there is sudden loss of hair. Second, the patches of hair loss may enlarge. Last, the hair begins to grow back. This cycle can take months to years. In some people, hair loss may be permanent. Occasionally, other autoimmune diseases, such as thyroiditis, occur together with the hair loss and some tests may be done to check for these.

### **TREATMENT**

Hair sometimes grows back by itself slowly over time. Hair has the best chance of returning if a small area of the scalp is involved and if the hair loss is recent. Sometimes, new hair is temporarily gray or white, but will usually return to its natural color. The natural regrowth of hair can often be accelerated by injecting a cortisone medicine into the skin affected by the hair loss. Some rare side effects of cortisone injections include pain, infection, and depression or dimpling of the skin at the site of injection. (Skin can also be depressed at these sites by the disease itself without any cortisone).

Unfortunately, there is no way to prevent new areas of hair loss. Once a person has alopecia areata, he or she is more likely than others to have a recurrence of the condition in the future. However, as new areas of hair loss appear, repeat cortisone injections may help with regrowth.

There are several topical therapies that are also effective. Some of these, such as anthralin or squaric acid, may irritate the scalp enough to cause a rash; these treatments depend on this irritation to stimulate hair growth. Special light therapy (PUVA, NBUVB) can also be used to activate hair growth. Topical cortisone preparations and immune modulating creams (Protopic, Elidel) may also be used alone or in combination with other treatments to promote hair growth.

Unfortunately, some people have hair loss that may be severe and long lasting. A wig may become necessary for men and women to cover severely affected areas. Dermatologists are always looking for new treatments and even people who have had alopecia areata for many years may be helped with some of our newer therapies.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, contact the National Alopecia Areata Foundation at the following address:

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