



Hair Loss



Changi
General Hospital

SingHealth

Hair loss

Hair has been referred to as our “crowning glory”. Society has placed a great deal of social and cultural importance on hair and hairstyles. Unfortunately, many conditions, diseases, and improper hair care can result in excessive hair loss. People who notice that their hair is shedding in large amounts after combing or brushing, or that their hair is becoming thinner or falling out, should consult a dermatologist.

Your dermatologist will evaluate your hair problem by asking questions about your diet, medications, including vitamins and health food taken in the last six months, family history of hair loss, recent illnesses and hair care habits. Hormonal effects may be evaluated in women by asking about their menstrual cycles, pregnancies and menopause. After examining the scalp and hair, the dermatologist may check a few hairs under the microscope. Sometimes, blood tests or a scalp biopsy may be required for an accurate diagnosis. It is important to find the root cause of the problem as this will determine whether or not the problem will respond to medical treatment.

Normal hair growth

About 90 per cent of the hair on a person’s scalp is growing at any one time. The growth phase lasts between 2 to 6 years. 10 per cent of the hair is in a resting phase that lasts for two to three months. At the end of its resting stage, the hair sheds. When a hair has shed, a new hair from the same follicle replaces it and the growing cycle starts again. Scalp hair grows about one half inch a month. As people age, their hair growth rate slows. Natural blondes typically have more hair (140,000 hairs) than brunettes (105,000 hairs) or redheads (90,000 hairs). Most hair shedding is due to the normal hair cycle and losing 50 to 100 hairs per day is no cause for alarm. However, you may wish to consult your dermatologist if you are concerned about excessive hair loss or dramatic thinning.

Causes of excessive hair loss

Improper hair cosmetic use/ hair care

Many people use chemical treatment(s) on their hair, including dyes, tints, bleaches, straighteners and permanent waves. These treatments rarely damage hair if they are done correctly. However, the hair can become weak and break if any of these chemicals are used too often, if the solution is left on for too long, if two chemical procedures are done on the same day and if bleach is applied to previously bleached hair. If hair becomes brittle from chemical treatment, it is best to stop until the hair has grown out.

Hairstyles that pull on the hair, like ponytails and braids, should not be pulled tightly and should be alternated with looser hairstyles. The constant pull causes some hair loss, especially along the sides of the scalp.

Shampooing, combing and brushing too often can also damage hair, causing it to break. Using a cream rinse or conditioner after shampooing will make it easier to comb and more manageable. When hair is wet, it is more fragile; vigorous rubbing with a towel, and rough combing and brushing should be avoided. Following the old adage of 100 brush strokes a day will damage the hair, instead, use wide-toothed combs and brushes with smooth tips.

Hereditary thinning or balding

Hereditary balding or thinning is the most common cause of hair loss. The tendency can be inherited from either parent's side of the family. Women with this trait develop thinning hair, but do not become completely bald. The condition is called androgenetic alopecia and it can start in their teens, twenties or thirties. Although there is no cure, there are some recent medical treatments that are available which may be of help to some people. One treatment involves applying a lotion, minoxidil, to the scalp twice a day. Another treatment for men is a daily pill containing finasteride, a drug that blocks the formation of the active male hormone in the hair follicle. Some women may benefit from hormone pills.

When confronted with thinning hair or baldness, some people consider hair transplantation, which is a permanent form of hair replacement. The procedure of hair transplantation involves moving some hair from hair-bearing portions (donor sites) of the head to bald or thinning portions (recipient sites) and/ or removing bald skin. As the procedures involve surgery as well as time and money, they should not be taken lightly.



Androgenetic Alopecia – Male



Androgenetic Alopecia – Female

Your dermatologist will help to decide which method or combination of methods is right for you.

Alopecia areata

For this type of hair loss, hair usually falls out, resulting in totally smooth, round patches about the size of a coin or larger. The result of complete loss of scalp and body hair is rare. This disease may affect children or adults of any age. The cause of alopecia areata is unknown. Apart from hair loss, affected people are generally in excellent health. In most cases, the hair regrows by itself. Dermatologists can recommend treatments such as topical medications, injections, light treatment, or in some cases, oral tablets.



Alopecia Areata

Childbirth

When a woman is pregnant, she has more hair growth. However, after she delivers her baby, many hairs enter the resting phase of the hair cycle (called telogen effluvium). For two to three months, some women will notice large amounts of hair coming out in their brushes and combs. This can last for one to six months, but resolves completely on its own in most cases.

High fever, severe infection, and/ or flu

Certain illnesses may cause hairs to enter the resting phase. Hair loss may occur for four weeks to three months after suffering from a high fever, severe illness or infection. This shedding usually corrects itself.

Thyroid disease

Both over-active and under-active thyroids can cause hair loss. Your physician can diagnose thyroid disease with laboratory tests. Hair loss associated with thyroid disease can be reversed with proper treatment.

Inadequate protein in diet

Some people who go on crash diets that are low in protein, or have severely abnormal eating habits, may develop protein malnutrition. The body will save protein by shifting growing hairs into the resting phase. Massive hair shedding can occur two to three months later. Hair can then be pulled out by the roots fairly easily. This condition can be reversed and prevented by eating the appropriate amount of protein and when dieting, to maintain adequate protein intake.

Medications

Some prescription drugs may cause temporary hair shedding. Examples include some of the medicines used for the following conditions - acne, gout, arthritis, depression, heart problems, high blood pressure, or thin blood. High doses of vitamin A may also cause hair shedding.

Cancer treatment

Some cancer treatments will cause hair cells to stop dividing. Hairs become thin and break off as they exit the scalp. This usually occurs one to three weeks after the treatment. Patients can lose up to 90 per cent of their scalp hair. The hair will regrow after treatment ends. Patients may want to get wigs before undergoing treatment.

Birth control pills

Women who lose hair while taking birth control pills usually have an inherited tendency for hair thinning. If hair thinning occurs, a woman can consult her gynaecologist about switching to another birth control pill. When a woman stops using oral contraceptives, she may notice that her hair begins shedding two to three months later. This may continue for six months before it stops. This is similar to suffering from hair loss after childbirth.

Low serum iron

Iron deficiency occasionally causes hair loss. Some people do not have enough iron in their diet or may not fully absorb iron. Women who have heavy menstrual periods may develop iron deficiency. Low iron can be detected by laboratory tests and can be corrected by taking iron pills.

Major surgery/ chronic illness

Anyone who has had a major operation may notice an increase in hair shedding within one to three months afterwards. The condition reverses itself within a few months but people who have a severe chronic illness may shed hair indefinitely.

Fungal infection (ringworm) of the scalp

Ringworm infections (which has nothing to do with worms) are caused by a type of fungus and begins with small patches of scaling that can spread and result in broken hair, redness, swelling, and even oozing. This contagious disease is most common in children and can be cured with oral medication.

Hair pulling (trichotillomania)

Children and sometimes adults will twist or pull their hair, brows or lashes until they come out. This is usually especially common among children and is often just a bad habit that can be corrected when the harmful effects of this habit are explained. Sometimes hair pulling can be a coping response to unpleasant stress and occasionally is a sign of a serious problem needing the help of a mental health professional.

Questions?

Visit your dermatologist if you have any questions as excessive hair loss can have different causes. Hair will regrow spontaneously in some forms of hair loss.

Other forms can be treated successfully by a dermatologist. Useful tips to prevent further hair loss include the use of a wide-toothed comb, avoid using hair brushes, curlers, excessive traction and perming your hair.

For appointments to our Dermatology Clinic, please call the
CGH Appointment Centre at (65) 6850 3333.



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