



Hair loss / thinning

Overview

Strong, shiny hair is recognised as a natural sign of well being, so if you experience hair loss, it's not surprising that you may be concerned.

Recent studies on the quality of life in men and women with thinning hair show that excessive hair loss can have major psychological effects. While men may feel less attractive and older than their peers, women with thinning hair typically have both social and emotional concerns¹.

If your hair seems to be thinning, you may feel self-conscious and try to camouflage thinning hair, while getting frustrated that you can't always style your hair as you would wish. However it's very likely that no-one else notices your hair is thinning nearly as much as you do.

There are things you can do to deal positively with the situation. To appreciate exactly what's happening to your hair, it helps to have a basic understanding of the structure and lifecycle of the hair.

The hair structure²

The hair follicle encases the lower part of the hair shaft and contains blood vessels that nurture new hair growth.

When you are born, all your hair follicles are present and, through your lifetime, each follicle will grow and shed single hairs in a repetitive cycle of growth and resting phases.

The growth phase for each hair lasts two to three years, then the follicle enters a resting phase when the hair does not grow. After three to four months of resting, the hair is shed and a new growth cycle begins.

Normally about 80 to 90 percent of follicles are growing at any time and about 75 follicles shed their hair every day. However, some hair follicles have a growth phase that's shorter than normal and produce hair shafts that are unusually short and thin. These follicles are said to be miniturized.

Women with thinning hair have a mosaic of variable-diameter hairs in the affected area of the scalp, meaning that the miniturized hair follicles cause a visible thinning of hair density³.

Causes of hair loss

The most common cause of hair loss in women is hormonal, hereditary hair loss, known as female androgenetic alopecia, which causes a general thinning of the hair all over the head.

However, various other conditions can cause different patterns of hair loss — and these may be prompted by factors such as stress, an auto-immune response, an infection or as a side effect of medication.

Androgenetic alopecia (called female diffuse thinning) is the most common reason for excessive female hair loss⁴. It is related to hormone levels in the body and it may be genetically inherited from your father or mother.

Androgenetic alopecia is responsible for the typical balding pattern that affects about 50 percent of men as they age. However, the pattern of hair loss in women is different, as the hairline does not recede, but the hair becomes thinner all over the head, occasionally with a prominent triangle of thinning hair behind the retained front fringe.

Research suggests that female androgenetic alopecia is quite common, beginning in the late 20s and reaching its peak after the age of 50⁵. Some reports identify that while 13 percent of premenopausal women show some signs of androgenetic alopecia, this incidence increases greatly following menopause and may affect 75 percent of women over the age of 65⁶. It also seems to affect white women more, with 50 percent of Caucasian women being affected by thinning hair by the age of 50⁷.

Androgens (male sex hormones) play a clear role in male pattern baldness, but it isn't certain whether androgens are responsible for female androgenetic alopecia, as the majority of women with the condition have normal androgen levels in their bloodstream⁸.

Telogen effluvium⁹ is another very common reason for female hair loss. This condition causes a widely spread shedding of hairs around the scalp and the body. This is usually a reaction to severe physical or hormonal stress, or as a side effect of medication. Many adults have an episode of telogen effluvium in their lives, as a result of illness or stress.

Telogen is a resting phase of hair growth, in which the hair remains in the follicle until pushed out by the growth of a new hair in the anagen (growth) phase. About 15 percent of hairs are in telogen at any one time. But sudden stress can trigger a greater proportion of hairs to enter the telogen phase at the same time. About three months after this occurs, this large amount of hair starts to fall out.

The condition can occur at any age and usually begins quite suddenly. For most people it gets better on its own within about six months, although it can become a chronic problem. However, because telogen effluvium is related to

the growth cycles of hair, it often gets better with time, when the hairs enter the anagen phase once again¹⁰.

Alopecia areata also causes hair loss in women. It is not known exactly what causes this condition, although there is much support for it having an autoimmune component. Other possible factors are stress and it may also run in families.

Alopecia areata doesn't show as general thinning of the hair, but as distinct circular or oval patches of baldness, leaving smooth skin completely devoid of hair.

The condition can occur at any age from childhood on, but is most common in people between 15 and 30 years old. Loss of more than 40 percent of the hair occurs in only about 7 percent of cases¹⁰. The condition is known as alopecia totalis if all scalp hair is lost and alopecia universalis if all body hair is also lost.

In minor cases, spontaneous recovery usually occurs within a few months, although this is less likely in more severe cases affecting 50 percent on the scalp or more. A large study of severe cases found that 44 percent of children and 34 percent of adults had a significant period of normal or near-normal hair growth.

However, there was no hair re-growth in 22 percent of children and 34 percent of adults. The relapse rate over 5 years is 90 percent¹⁰.

Infections causing hair loss¹¹

Fungal infections such as ringworm or piedra cause hair loss in areas in which the individual hair fibres are infected by a fungus. Ringworm leaves a patch of bald, scaly skin which may be itchy and inflamed. Piedra is indicated by the development of hard nodules on the hair fibres.

Folliculitis is a local inflammation of the hair follicles, caused by a virus, yeast or fungal infection. This causes small rings of inflammation around the opening of the hair follicles and often causes the hair to fall out. Treatment of folliculitis may require antibiotics.

Seborrheic dermatitis is a skin disease causing irritation and inflammation as a result of excessive sebum and yeast production. If seborrheic dermatitis occurs on the scalp or other areas of body where there is hair, it can also cause temporary hair loss or hair thinning.

Illness causing hair loss¹²

Hair loss can also be caused by hormonal problems, for example if your thyroid gland is overactive or underactive, or by a disease such as lupus or diabetes. Therefore it is very important to diagnose the cause of the hair loss, so that any underlying conditions can be treated.

Some medicines — such as those used for thinning blood, in treating gout and in chemotherapy — can all cause hair loss, as can the contraceptive pill and antidepressants. In these situations, hair loss will improve when you are no longer on the medication.

Bald patches may also be due to Scarring Alopecia, which can be the result of local radiation therapy, injury, or various medical or dermatologic conditions such as lupus and lichen planus¹¹

Treatments

Thinning hair may be an indication that the root of the hair does not have a sufficient supply of nutrients. Certain shampoos can also help to create more volume in the hair. In the case of a fungal infection, your GP may prescribe a topical application, or anti-fungal drug, in order to treat the infection and allow restoration of the hair. An infection may also be treated with medicated shampoos, or with a corticosteroid cream or lotion which may be used to control the immune response.

One medicine that may help hair regrowth is minoxidil which is available without prescription as a lotion applied directly to the scalp. However studies show that only about 20 percent of women have moderate regrowth, while 40 percent report minimal regrowth using minoxidil. These figures are for younger women aged 18 to 45 with early hair loss⁹.

If hair loss is caused by an underlying illness, such as thyroid problems, treatment of the illness will usually halt the hair loss.

Sources:

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A wide range of women's health resources are available at www.healthywomen.org.uk

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