
Patient Information

Hair Loss and Cancer Treatment



Comments, Feedback?

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- ✗ Avoid perming or bleaching your new hair for six months.
- ✗ Avoid brushing your hair too much.
- ✗ Avoid pulling on the hair, braiding your hair or putting your hair in a ponytail.
- ✗ Avoid using electric rollers, hair dryers and curling irons.

Do you need more information?

Your health care team at the London Regional Cancer Program can give you more information about hair loss.

References

The information in this booklet is based on the following sources:

1. American Cancer Society, 2006 found at <http://www.cancer.org>
2. Mayo Foundation, 2006 found at <http://www.cnn.com/HEALTH/library/CA/00037.html>
3. Cancer Care Nova Scotia, 2006 found at www.cancercare.ns.ca

Questions and Notes

Helpful hints to manage your hair loss

- ✓ Prepare yourself and those around you for the feelings of sadness that you may feel if you lose your hair. Let your family, friends and the people you work with know that it may happen.
- ✓ Talk with your health care team about your feelings and concerns. They are there to help you.
- ✓ Purchase a wig before your treatment begins or at the start of treatment. This will help you match your hair color and get used to your new look.
- ✓ If your hair is long, or you are bothered by hair falling out, you may choose to have your hair cut short.
- ✓ Wash your hair and scalp with lukewarm water and only when necessary. Use colourless, scent-free shampoos that are pH balanced (5.5). Dove® unscented is one example.
- ✓ Use a hair conditioner to keep your hair from tangling.
- ✓ Use a wide-toothed comb.
- ✓ Wear a hair net or a soft cap at night, or sleep on a satin pillowcase to keep your hair from coming out in clumps.
- ✓ Gently wash around your eyebrows and eyelashes.
- ✓ Use a sunblock with SPF 15 or higher to protect your skin. Your skin will be more sensitive to the sun, cold and wind. Protect it by covering up with a hat, turban or scarf. Cotton items tend to stay on a smooth scalp better than nylon or polyester.



Hair Loss and Cancer Treatment

Your hair

Your scalp has approximately 100,000 hairs on it. They are always growing, with older hairs falling out and being replaced by newer hairs.



If you are having chemotherapy or radiation therapy there is a chance the treatment will stop this process and cause hair loss. Hair loss is also called alopecia (al-uh-pee-shee-uh).

What causes hair loss?

Cancer is caused by cells that are growing out of control. Some **chemotherapy** drugs work by stopping the growing process of the cancer cells. But, these drugs can also affect normal cells that grow, like the cells found in your hair's roots (follicles). This is why your hair may fall out. It is important to know that not all chemotherapy drugs cause hair loss.

Different chemotherapy drugs can cause different types of hair loss. Some drugs may cause all of the hair on your body



to fall out, including your head, eyelashes, eyebrows, armpits, the pubic areas and other body hair. Some may only cause your hair to thin or it might be confined to one place, like your head. The amount of hair and where you lose it depends on the type of chemotherapy treatment you receive.

Sometimes your hair will start to grow back in during chemotherapy; this does not mean the treatment has stopped working. Hair loss may continue for about one month after your last chemotherapy treatment. Most of the time, your hair will grow back after your treatments have ended.

Radiation therapy can also cause hair loss. Unlike chemotherapy where drugs travel throughout the body, radiation therapy is a treatment that targets the tumour using high-energy radiation beams. This means your hair loss will only happen in the area that is being treated with radiation. The amount of hair you lose will depend on the amount of radiation therapy you receive. Sometimes when the head is radiated, the hair not grow back.

Your health care team will tell you about all the expected side effects of your treatment.

What will happen when I lose my hair?

Hair loss usually begins 10 to 14 days after starting treatment. The hair can fall out quickly, in clumps, or gradually. You may notice hair on your pillow, clothes, in your hairbrush or in the shower drain. You will continue to lose your hair while you are receiving treatment. This may go on for about one month after your treatment. Your scalp may also feel tingly, sore, or tender because of the cancer treatment. These feelings are temporary.



Will my hair grow back?

It takes your hair about four to six weeks to start growing after you have finished your chemotherapy treatment. The hair grows back about a quarter of an inch or five millimeters every month. You may notice that your hair looks and feels different. It might be curlier than before or it may be gray until the cells that make the colour in your hair work again. It usually takes six months to a year to grow back your hair.



How can I cope with hair loss?

Hair loss can be very emotionally upsetting for both men and women. It is also a side effect to cancer treatment, which is the most visible to others. The support of family and friends may help you maintain a positive attitude. Using supportive care services at the London Regional Cancer Program and in the community can help you manage a healthy body image during this time.

Women can attend a free workshop called “**Look Good Feel Better.**” This workshop shows techniques to hide appearance related side effects of chemotherapy and radiation therapy. Wigs and other alternatives are also demonstrated. Registration is required because space is limited. Call 519-685-8622 to register for a workshop. They are usually held twice a month at the London Regional Cancer Program.

“**Look Good, Feel Better**” workshops are also available at other locations in London and within the Southwestern Ontario region. Call 1-800-914-5665, or go to www.lookgoodfeelbetter.ca to find a workshop in your area.