

Hair Loss Following Treatment with Chemotherapy or Radiation Therapy

Some treatments for cancer cause hair to fall out. Your hair can thin, fall out in patches, or fall out completely. **Hair loss caused by cancer treatment is temporary;** the hair grows back when treatment is finished.

This booklet is about hair loss. It suggest ways for you to maintain your appearance if hair loss or hair thinning occurs.

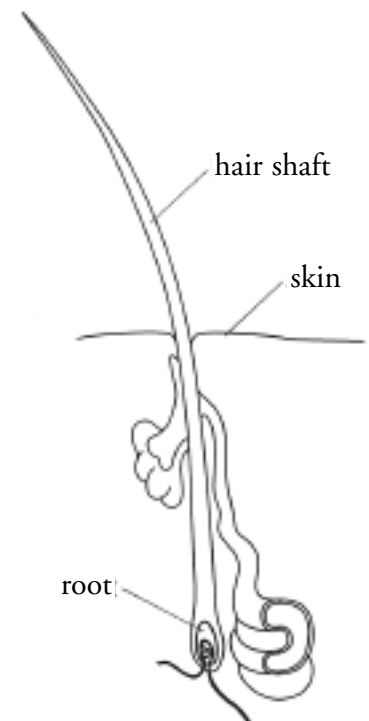
What Our Patients Say

- “In the beginning, it didn’t bother me. I just wanted to live. But when it happened, it bothered me a lot. I found out I cared very much [about losing my hair]. I’m used to it now.”
- “Psychologically, it was a difficult thing to come to grips with.”
- “It did concern me. It’s [my hair] part of me. I couldn’t imagine me being bald...not by my own choice. I didn’t know what to expect.”
- “It’s very hard [losing your hair]. It’s not something you can get away from. There’s no light at the end of the tunnel right now because I don’t know when the chemo will end. It’s hard to accept. No matter how prepared you think you are, you’re not! I can no longer joke about it as easily anymore.”
- “It’s not as bad as I thought.”

Why You Will Lose Your Hair

All cells in the body go through phases of growth and rest. Some cancer treatments attack cancer cells that grow rapidly. These treatments can also act on healthy cells that grow rapidly like hair. Your hair is made up of two parts: the shaft, or what you see, and the root, which is under the scalp. Hair growth occurs at the root. Chemo drugs go through the blood to many places, including the hair root. The drugs can block the growth of these root cells, making your hair weak and causing it to fall out. Because the growth and rest pattern of your hair varies, hair thinning may not occur evenly over your scalp. Radiation disrupts hair growth in the same way; however, hair loss occurs only in the parts of the body getting treatment.

Hair may start to thin one to four weeks after the first chemo treatment. It takes about four weeks in the case of radiation. How quickly hair falls out varies from person to person. It also depends on the treatment. You may first notice hair on your pillow in the morning. You may see it when you shower or brush your hair. Once the treatments have stopped, your hair will grow back. It can take three to five months and it may look or feel a little different. There is a **very rare** risk that the hair will not grow back when radiation is given to the head.



Caring For Your Hair During Treatment

These suggestions won't prevent hair loss, but they might make it easier for you.

- Consider cutting your hair short to prepare for any hair loss.
- Use a mild shampoo and a cream rinse or hair conditioner every two to four days. Try a baby shampoo.
- Use a shampoo and conditioner with a sunscreen. They prevent damage from the sun. Rinse your hair and condition it after swimming in a pool.
- Rinse your hair thoroughly and gently pat it dry.
- Use a hair net, turban, or scarf to contain falling hair.
- Use a satin pillowcase. It might decrease hair tangles. Satin is smoother than other fabrics.
- Gently use a wide-tooth comb or bristle brush on your hair. Comb your hair from the ends and gently work up toward your scalp. You can also “finger” comb your hair by using your moistened fingers.
- Tell your hairdresser that you are receiving chemo. He or she can recommend gentle products.
- If you have lost all your hair, keep your head covered in the summer. This prevents sunburn. Use a sunscreen on your scalp if you do not cover your head.
- In the winter, cover your head with a hat, scarf, turban, or wig to prevent heat loss.

Do not use the following on your hair. They may be too harsh or pull or tug on your hair.

- Hair spray, coloring, dye, bleach, or permanents (“perm”)
- Clips, barrettes, bobby pins, and scrunchies
- Braids, corn rows, pony tails
- Hair dryers, curlers, or curling irons
- Rubber bathing or swimming caps

Hairpieces

If you want to wear a wig, try to get it before your hair falls out. This way, you can match your hair color and style. If you have already had hair loss, bring a photo of your usual hair style and a lock of hair with you when you go to buy a wig. This will help you find one that looks like your hair did before your treatment started.

When shopping for a wig, you may want to check prices in more than one store. The price and quality can be different. Ask your nurse or social worker for places to go. You can also call American Cancer Society for information. Your hairdresser may also be a good resource. A wig should:

- Fit properly and comfortably.
- Match your hair color.
- Match your hair style.
- Be easy to care for.

When you try on a wig, ask for privacy. Many stores have “try-on” rooms. The salesperson may be trained to help you pick the best wig.

You may want to start wearing your wig as soon as your hair begins to thin. As your hair gets thinner, you may need to have the wig adjusted to make it fit better.

Custom-Made (expensive)

This is a wig designed just for you. It is made by hand. Varying amounts of hair are put into the wig one strand at a time.

A mold is taken of your head so that the fit looks natural. Three visits are usually needed. One is for measuring. The others are to fit the wig, and have you check the color and styling.

Customized Ready-Made (moderately expensive)

These can be human hair, synthetic blends, or some of both. They are made in standard sizes, but can be fixed to fit. The wig can be styled to look more like your own hair.

Ready-Made Stock (inexpensive)

Stock wigs are usually made of stretch material in one-size fits all. The salesperson can show you how to comb it. If you buy a ready-made wig, you can wear it home the same day.

The Area Hairpiece

If you lose hair in only one area, a hairpiece might be better than a wig. It is made to blend in when combed into your own hair. An area hairpiece can be made in any size, color, or shape you want.

The Fashion Hairpiece

The fashion wig can be any hairstyle. Whatever you want can be made into this type of hairpiece. It can change your look or style at a moment's notice.

Insurance

Your health insurance may cover the cost of your wig or hair piece. The doctor must write a prescription first. Check with your insurance plan to see how much they will pay.

If you have to pay for the wig yourself, you might be able to take the cost off your taxes. Check with your tax adviser. You can also call the American Cancer Society to see if they can give you a wig.

Scarves, Turbans, and Hats

Scarves and turbans can be attractive and fashionable. They help hold hair that is falling out and also hide a bald scalp. Scarves made from silk may easily slide off your head. A scarf made of a cotton blend may be more comfortable. Turbans are sold in many drug stores. Some even have a small amount of hair at the forehead. They come in lots of colors and textures. Some patients have found it useful to use a wig, a scarf, and a turban at different times. Hats worn with or without scarves can also be attractive and comfortable.

Look Good...Feel Better

Make-up can make you look good and feel better during cancer treatment. That is what is behind the Look Good...Feel Better Program. It teaches you how to put on make-up when your skin color has changed or you have lost your eyebrows or eyelashes. To learn more, call your local American Cancer Society or call 1-800-395-LOOK.

