Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Hair Loss and Your Cancer Treatment

This information will help you understand hair loss during cancer treatment.

About Hair Loss and Your Cancer Treatment

Many people with cancer lose their hair because of chemotherapy, immunotherapy, endocrine therapy, or radiation to the head. There are also other causes of hair loss. These include:

- Having a family history of hair loss
- Being low in certain vitamins
- Going through hormonal changes
- Having certain medical conditions (such as hypothyroidism)
- Having different hairstyles
- Taking certain medications
- Being stressed

If you’re starting to lose your hair, it’s important to see your dermatologist (skin doctor). They can help you figure out the reason for your hair loss and answer any questions you may have about your hair. Your dermatologist will ask about your history of hair loss and look at the areas where you’re losing your hair.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why will I lose my hair during cancer treatment?

Cancer treatments, such as radiation and chemotherapy, attack fast-growing cancer cells. These treatments can also affect normal cells that grow fast, such as hair cells.

Chemotherapy can cause hair loss on your scalp, pubic area, arms, legs, eyebrows, and eyelashes. Radiation therapy to your head often causes hair loss on your scalp. Sometimes, depending on the dose of radiation to your head, your hair may grow back differently from how it looked before, or it may not grow back at all.

When will I begin to lose my hair?

You may start to see your hair thin or fall out 1 to 4 weeks after your first chemotherapy treatment and 4 weeks after you receive radiation therapy.

The amount of hair that falls out or thins depends on the type, dose, and timing of your treatments. The speed at

which it falls out also varies from person to person. You may first notice hair on your pillow in the morning or see it when you shower or brush your hair.

Some people will experience hair thinning rather than hair loss. Hair thinning is when your hair feels and looks thinner in texture. Talk with your healthcare team about what to expect after your chemotherapy or radiation therapy.

When will my hair grow back?

Once you finish your treatments, your hair should begin to grow back. Hair regrowth can take 3 to 5 months. When your hair grows back, it may have a different texture or color. In rare cases, your hair won't grow back as fully as it did before.

There is a very small risk that your hair won't grow back after radiation therapy to your head.

Caring For Your Hair and Head

Here are some ways you can care for your hair and head while you're experiencing hair loss:

- Wash and condition your hair every 2 to 4 days. Use baby shampoo or other mild shampoo (such as Aveeno® or Vanicream™). You should also use a cream rinse or hair conditioner.

- Use shampoos and conditioners that have sunscreen to prevent sun damage to your scalp.
- Always rinse your hair well and pat it dry with a soft towel.
- Wash your hair after swimming in a pool.
- Don’t expose your scalp to the sun.
- Keep your head covered in the summer.
- In the winter, cover your head with a hat, scarf, turban, or wig to keep it warm. This can also help to catch falling hair.
- Sleep on a satin or silk pillowcase. These are smoother than other fabrics and can decrease hair tangles.
- Brush or comb your hair gently with a soft-bristle brush or comb. Start brushing or combing your hair at the ends and gently work your way up to your scalp. You can also comb through your hair with your fingers. Wet your fingers with water first.
- If your hair is long, you may want to have it cut short before you begin treatment.
- Tell your hairdresser that you’re receiving chemotherapy. They may be able to recommend gentle hair products.

- Try using Bumble and bumble™ Hair Powder to cover bald spots and thinning areas of your hair. You can buy it at Sephora® or online from various beauty supply websites.

Don’t use the following on your hair during treatment because they can be too harsh or pull on your hair:

- Hair spray, hair dye, bleach, or permanents (perms)
- Clips, barrettes, bobby pins, pony tail holders, or hair ties (scrunchies)
  - Don’t put your hair in braids, cornrows, or pony tails.
- Hair dryers, curlers, curling irons, or hair straighteners
- Rubber bathing or swimming caps

Wigs, Hairpieces, and Head Coverings

Wigs

If you want to wear a wig, try to get one before your hair falls out because it will be easier to match your hair color and style. If you have already experienced hair loss, bring a photo of your usual hairstyle and, if you can, a lock of your hair. This will help you find a wig that looks like your hair did before your treatment started.

When shopping for a wig, you may want to shop around and compare prices.

A wig should fit well, be comfortable, and be easy to care for. 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 your wig adjusted to make it fit better.

There are many types of wigs and hairpieces. Here is a list of the most common types:

Custom-made wigs

Custom-made wigs are made by hand and are usually the most expensive type of wig. These wigs are made using your specific head measurements. Getting a custom-made wig may require several visits to the wig store for it to be colored, cut, and cleaned. Custom-made wigs are usually made of human hair, but can be made of synthetic (not human) materials.

Customized ready-made wigs

Customized ready-made wigs can be made of human hair, synthetic blends, or a mixture of both. They are made in standard sizes, but can be altered to fit your head. These wigs can be styled and generally cost less than a custom-made wig.

Ready-made or stock wigs

Ready-made or stock wigs are usually made out of a stretchy material and come in 1 size. If you buy a ready-made wig, you can usually take it home the same day that you purchase it. Ready-made wigs are generally the least expensive type of wig.

Hairpieces

If you lose your hair in only 1 area, you may want to buy a hairpiece rather than a wig. A hairpiece will blend into your own hair. It can be made in any size, color, or shape.

Head coverings
Scarves, turbans, and hats

- Scarves, turbans, and hats can help hold hair that is falling out and hide a bald scalp.
- Scarves made from silk can easily slide off your head. You may want a scarf made of a cotton blend because they can be more comfortable.
- Turbans are sold in many drug stores and come in many different colors and textures.
- You can also wear a hat with or without scarves.

For more information about where to buy wigs and hairpieces, read our resource *Where to Buy Wigs and*

Hairpieces (www.mskcc.org/pe/wigs-hairpieces).

Financial Support

People who lose their hair from cancer treatment may have insurance coverage for a wig or hairpiece. In this case, your doctor should write a prescription with a diagnosis code showing that your hair loss is due to treatment for cancer. Check with your insurance company for details.

Additional resources for financial support include:

American Cancer Society (ACS)

www.cancer.org

Some American Cancer Society offices offer free wigs to people with cancer. For more information, go to your local American Cancer Society office or call 800-ACS-2345 (800-227-2345).

Cancer*Care*

www.cancercare.org

Cancer*Care* offers free wigs to people with cancer. Call 800-813-HOPE (800-813-4673) and ask to speak with a social worker.

The Look Good Feel Better Program

The Look Good Feel Better program is designed to help people cope with the effects that cancer treatment can have on their appearance. During weekly sessions, makeup artists teach makeup techniques, skin and nail care, and hair styling and head-covering options. To register for a class, call Look Good Feel Better at 800-395-LOOK (800-395-5665) or visit www.lookgoodfeelbetter.org.

Men can find information at www.lookgoodfeelbetter.org/programs/men.

Medications and Supplements for Hair Loss

Medications and supplements for hair loss can slow hair thinning and increase coverage of your scalp by growing new hair and enlarging existing hairs. Ask your healthcare provider for more information.

They will write their recommendations for you in the space below.

If you have any questions, contact a member of your care team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5 p.m., during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

Hair Loss and Your Cancer Treatment - Last updated on December 12, 2022
All rights owned and reserved by Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center