



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 (chemo), immunotherapy, endocrine therapy, or radiation to the head. There are also other causes of hair loss. These are:

- Having a family history of hair loss
- Being low in certain vitamins
- Going through hormonal changes
- Having certain medical conditions, such as hypothyroidism (HY-poh-THY-roy-dih-zum). This is when your thyroid gland does not make enough hormones.
- Having different hairstyles
- Taking certain medicines
- 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. They can also answer any questions you may have about your hair. Your dermatologist will ask about your history of hair loss. They will also look at the areas where you're losing your hair.

Commonly asked questions

Why will I lose my hair during cancer treatment?

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

Chemo 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, your hair may grow back different from how it looked before. Or, it may not grow back at all. This depends on the dose of radiation to your head.

When will I start to lose my hair?

You may start to see your hair thin or fall out:

- 1 to 4 weeks after your first chemo treatment.
- 4 weeks after you have 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 is different from person to person. You may first notice hair on your pillow in the morning. Or, you may see it when you shower or brush your hair.

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

When will my hair grow back?

Once your treatments end, your hair should start 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 will not grow back as fully as it did before.

There is a very small chance that your hair will not 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 having 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.
- Do not 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 reduce 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 cut it short before you start treatment.
- Tell your hairdresser that you're getting chemo. They may be able to recommend gentle hair products.
- Try using a camouflaging hair powder (such as Bumble and bumble™ Hair Powder or Toppik™ Hair Building Fibers or Spray). It can help cover bald spots and thinning areas of your hair. You can buy it at Sephora® or online from beauty supply websites.

Limit use of the following on your hair during treatment. They can be too harsh or pull on your hair:

- Hair spray, hair dye, bleach, or permanents (perms)
- Clips, barrettes, bobby pins, ponytail holders, or hair ties (scrunchies)
 - Do not put your hair in braids, cornrows, or ponytails.
- 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. This will make it easier to find a wig that matches your hair color and hairstyle. If you already have hair loss, bring a photo of your usual hairstyle. Bring a lock of your hair too, if you can. This will help you find a wig that looks like your hair did before your treatment started.

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 starts 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 often the most expensive type of wig. These wigs are made using your specific head measurements. You may have to visit the wig store a few times to get your wig colored, cut, and cleaned. Custom-made wigs are often 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 mix of both. They are made in standard sizes but can be adjusted to fit your head. These wigs can be styled and often cost less than a custom-made wig.

Ready-made or stock wigs

Ready-made or stock wigs are often made from a stretchy material and come in 1 size. Most people can take a ready-made wig home the same day they buy it. Ready-made wigs are often 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.

To learn more about where to buy wigs and hairpieces, read *Where to Buy Wigs and Hairpieces* (www.mskcc.org/pe/wigs-hairpieces).

Financial support

When shopping for a wig or hairpiece, you may want to shop around and compare prices. People who lose their hair from cancer treatment may have insurance coverage for a wig or hairpiece. Before you visit any stores or websites, ask your insurance company if:

- They will cover part of the cost of a wig or hairpiece.
- You need a prescription for a wig or hairpiece. If you do, ask your healthcare provider to write a prescription for a cranial prosthesis (KRAY-nee-ul pros-THEE-sis). The prescription should include a diagnosis code showing that your hair loss is due to treatment for cancer.

Additional resources for financial support

American Cancer Society (ACS)

www.cancer.org

Some ACS offices offer free wigs to people with cancer. To learn more, visit your local ACS office or call 800-ACS-2345 (800-227-2345).

CancerCare

www.cancercare.org

CancerCare 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 helps 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, visit www.lookgoodfeelbetter.org or call 800-395-LOOK (800-395-5665).

Males can find more information at

www.lookgoodfeelbetter.org/programs/men

Medicines and supplements for hair loss

Medicines and supplements for hair loss can slow hair thinning. They can also 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 questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

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

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