

# HAIR LOSS AND THINNING

## WHAT IS BEAUTIFUL HAIR?

If we ask people what do they consider as beautiful hair, we get many different answers.

Just look at children for instance. Most children, at some stage of their lives, will cry about the way their hair look or about the tangles and frizzes.

When we grow up, very few of us are happy with our hair. If you have curly hair, you want straight hair, if you have straight hair, you want curly hair, if you have blond hair, you want to be a brunette or you want to be a red head and so it goes on.

The hair industry is therefore making lots of money to provide products that will serve our fickle tastes.

## HAIR FACTS

- The average person, both male and female, has approximately 100 000 hairs on their head
- Around 100 of these are shed every day, but new hair also starts to grow every day; it is part of the hair's natural growth and regeneration cycle.
- When you lose more hair than the number of newly growing hair, the result is less and less hair (referred to as thinning hair) and eventually baldness.
- It is estimated that about 40% of women suffer from thinning hair.
- On the other hand male baldness is usually genetically predetermined (it runs in families).
- Good news is that hair loss and thinning hair in both men and women can be treated.

## HOW DOES HAIR GROW?

- Hair is like any other organ in your body. It has a growth cycle and then it dies and while doing that it reflects a person's overall state of health.
- The hair shaft (the part of the hair that we see) is made up of a protein called keratin. Keratin is the key structural material that makes up hair, nails and the outer layer of human skin. Keratin is a strong protein, so it protects the outer layer of our cells against damage or stress.
- Each hair undergoes a three to five year cycle of growth, followed by a period of non-growth for two to three months. The hair is then shed and a new hair follicle grows, forming a new hair.

- Hair normally grows at about one cm per month, although in some people it grows much faster than this.
- The hairs that are shed each day are dead hairs, which fall out as the follicles are replaced. When hair is not replaced as fast as it is lost, it results in hair thinning.
- Hair loss is common; affecting around 60% of men by the age of 35 years and women account for 40% of all hair loss victims.

## WHAT CAUSES HAIR LOSS?

Hair loss can be caused by a variety of different causes.

- Age
  - We naturally have fewer hair with age, because of a natural decrease in hormonal levels
  - The most common cause of hair loss is male hormones (androgens). This results in a receding hair line over the temple area and hair loss over the crown of the head and can result in complete baldness. Sensitivity to male hormones is more common in men and tends to run in families. It can start anytime from the teenage years onwards.
- Medication
  - Cancer treatment (chemotherapy) is the most common cause of hair loss when it comes to medicine. However, there are many other products that can lead to hair loss like anti-gout medications, anti-epilepsy medication, fertility drugs, blood thinning drugs, contraceptive pills, anti-inflammatories and beta-blockers.
  - The golden rule
    - Before using any of the above mentioned drugs, the effects related to hair growth should be discussed with the treating medical practitioner.
- Certain conditions
  - An underactive thyroid gland can cause hair to become coarser, drier and thinner. A blood test should be done by a medical practitioner to check the thyroid function.
  - Iron deficiency, whether it is due to a low dietary intake of iron or heavy menstrual periods and pregnancy, it can result in widespread hair loss. Women and vegetarians have an increased risk of iron deficiency. A blood test will need to be done to detect this condition.
  - Highly stressful events such as child birth, malnutrition, severe infection or surgery can stop hair growth and shift the hair into the shedding phase. Usually this happens about six weeks to three months after the original stressor. In the majority of people, the hair starts to regrow as soon as the stress levels come down, although hair growth can be delayed.



- Autoimmune alopecia is a condition in which the body's immune system attacks and rejects its own hair follicles. Autoimmune alopecia presents in many forms; bald patches, total loss of hair on the scalp, and total loss of all body hair.
- Other conditions such as local scalp infections, eczema and psoriasis can cause local hair loss accompanied with skin flaking and itching. These conditions can lead to scarring of the scalp which can cause permanent hair loss if left untreated.

## WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT?

Hair loss can be a part of ageing or natural hormonal changes, but it can also be a sign of an underlying condition. Apart from hair loss, some of the conditions that are mentioned above can be serious, so it is important to discuss hair loss with your doctor.

Before any treatment is started, the cause for the hair loss needs to be identified in order to select an appropriate treatment. If the hair loss is not hereditary in nature, but rather due to behavioural factors such as stress, dietary deficiencies, hormonal changes, illness or medication, there are products that may help to return the hair to its former beauty.

## TREATMENTS

There are very effective products available to assist with thinning hair, provided that the cause of the condition has been addressed.

- *Minoxidil* is a locally acting ointment which is applied to the area of hair thinning once daily. It stimulates thickening of the hair follicles and hair regrowth. It only works in hormone-induced hair loss. The treatment takes three to four months to take effect. The effect only lasts as long as the medication is applied. If the medication is stopped, hair loss returns to its pre-treatment state after six months of stopping the treatment.
- **Shampoos**  
There are many shampoos which help to stimulate hair growth. Most of these boost blood circulation to the scalp thus supporting hair growth by increasing the amount of nutrients being delivered through the blood stream to the follicles.  
Caffeine shampoo seems to prevent hair loss by strengthening hair after daily washing. The caffeine in the shampoo travels along the hair shaft to the scalp where it has a strengthening effect on the hair. The shampoo does not contain any softeners (i.e. silicone) so it also helps improve the hair structure after just a few washes. Fine and weakened hair becomes stronger and can be styled more easily.

- **Serums**  
Similar to shampoos, these products help to strengthen the hair follicles by stiffening the collagen fibres leading to reduced hair loss.
- **Supplements**  
Vitamin supplements can help to support the growth of hair from the inside out. A good general vitamin supplement containing vitamin C, E and B7 can all boost collagen production.

## PRESCRIPTION TREATMENTS

- **Medication**  
When consulting a doctor about hair loss, a diagnosis of hormonal deficiency, may lead to a prescription for finasteride - an oral medication which can reverse the effects of hormone-induced hair thinning. It blocks the hormonal effects of testosterone which leads to hair loss. The medication will take three to four months to show full effect and only works as long as the treatment is continued. Hair will return to its pre-treatment state within 12 months of stopping the medication.
- **Surgery**  
Hair transplantation is an option when a person suffers from severe hair loss. Hair unaffected by male hormones (usually at the back of the scalp) is harvested from the root and transplanted to the balding area. Usually groups of four hair roots are transplanted as a single unit. The procedure is done under local anaesthetic with sedation. Not all follicles transplanted will grow, but improving techniques means better results for transplant users. This does provide a long-term solution which is not dependent on medication.

## CONCLUSION

Hair loss is far more common than is generally thought. Both men and women can suffer from hair loss and hair thinning. Do discuss the problem with your doctor, because thinning hair can be a sign of an underlying disease. There are many treatments available at present which can help to return hair to a healthy and shiny condition.

# DISCLAIMER

## TAKE NOTE

The information provided in this article is for education purposes only and does not serve as a medical diagnosis. Members should always consult their healthcare provider with serious symptoms.

Please note that Heritage Health plans do not necessarily cover the costs of the condition/s described.

