

Hair Loss

Hair loss or thinning is a potential side effect of some breast cancer treatments, including certain types of chemotherapy, hormonal therapy, targeted therapy, immunotherapy, or radiation therapy. In most cases, hair grows back after treatment is finished. But some people may experience longer term or permanent hair loss or thinning.

Understanding Hair Loss

Hair loss can be traumatic, regardless of the extent. Hair often plays a significant role in one's identity, and losing it can impact self-esteem and create a sense of vulnerability. Understanding what to expect can help you cope better with hair loss. Discuss with your doctors if the treatments you'll receive are likely to cause hair loss, the degree of loss, and the timing.

Chemotherapy and Hair Loss

Certain chemotherapy medicines can cause hair on your head and other body parts, like eyebrows, eyelashes, and pubic hair, to thin or fall out. The extent of hair loss depends on various factors, including:

- Type, combination, and dose of chemotherapy medicines
- Other medical conditions (such as thyroid disease)
- Nutrition status and stress levels
- Timing of chemotherapy treatments

Discuss with your doctors what to expect in your situation. If you're likely to experience hair loss, consider using a scalp cooling system or manual cold caps during infusion sessions. These methods might help limit hair loss, though they are typically not covered by insurance.

Why Chemotherapy Causes Hair Loss

Chemotherapy targets all rapidly dividing cells, including healthy cells like hair follicles, which are some of the fastest-growing cells in the body. Hair loss can occur gradually or rapidly, usually within a few weeks of starting treatment.

When Does Hair Grow Back After Chemotherapy?

Hair regrowth varies from person to person. Here's a typical timetable for hair regrowth on the head:

- **3–4 weeks after chemotherapy ends:** Soft fuzz
- **1 month to 6 weeks after:** Real hair starts to grow
- **2–3 months after:** About an inch of hair
- **3–6 months after:** About 2–3 inches of hair
- **12 months:** 4–6 inches of hair

Hair may grow back with a different color, texture, or volume. In many cases, hair eventually returns to its pretreatment state, but some people might experience incomplete regrowth or permanent hair loss, particularly with certain drugs like Taxotere.

Hormonal Therapy and Hair Loss

Some hormonal therapies can cause mild to moderate hair loss or thinning, particularly at the frontal hairline, middle part, or crown of the head. Hair loss typically begins within the first year of therapy and may persist as long as you take the medication, often for five to ten years. Hair usually starts to regrow a few months after stopping the therapy.

Targeted Therapy and Immunotherapy and Hair Loss

Some targeted therapies (e.g., Ibrance, Kisqali, Verzenio) may cause changes in hair texture, color, or mild hair loss. Hair regrowth typically begins several months after stopping the medication. Taking an aromatase inhibitor (e.g., Arimidex, Aromasin, Femara) alongside targeted therapies can increase the risk of hair loss. Immunotherapy generally doesn't cause hair loss.

Radiation Treatment and Hair Loss

Radiation therapy uses a high-energy beam to damage quickly growing cells in your body. The goal is to target cancer cells, but some normal cells (including those of the hair follicles) get damaged as well. Radiation only causes hair loss on the particular part of the body treated. If radiation is used to treat the breast, there is no hair loss on your head. But there might be loss of hair around the nipple, if you have hair there.

Manage Hair Loss

If you're receiving treatment for breast cancer that can cause hair loss, it's important to know you have options. Below, you can learn about ways to prevent and manage hair loss as a side effect of breast cancer treatments.

Managing Hair Loss from Chemotherapy

If chemotherapy medicines that will cause hair loss are part of your breast cancer treatment plan, there are steps you can take to prepare, possibly lessen hair loss, and protect your hair as it grows back.

Cold Caps and Scalp Cooling Systems

Cold caps and scalp cooling systems are tightly fitting hat-like devices filled with a cold gel or liquid coolant. Cold caps and scalp cooling systems have helped many people keep some or quite a bit of their hair during chemotherapy.

Wigs

Many people find that wearing a wig is a good solution for them if they experience hair loss from breast cancer treatment. A wig can provide a sense of normalcy, consistency, and privacy during cancer treatment. Experimenting with different wig styles and colors can also be quite fun!

Scarves, Hats, and Turbans

Many people find that scarves and hats are the easiest, most comfortable, and versatile solution for managing hair loss from breast cancer treatment. Scarves and hats can hide your hair loss, help keep you warm, protect you from the sun, and they can be stylish and fun to wear.

Summertime Tips for Hair Loss

If you've lost your hair from chemotherapy, or it's just starting to grow back, the most important thing during the summer is to protect the skin on your head from the sun. Beyond that, do whatever is most comfortable for you in the heat of summer.

Managing Ongoing Hair Thinning

Breast cancer treatments such as hormonal therapy, targeted therapy, and chemotherapy can cause some people to have ongoing mild to moderate hair loss. If you're concerned that your hair isn't growing back or is noticeably thinner than in the past, it's a good idea to see a dermatologist. If possible, seek out one who specializes in hair loss or an onco-dermatologist who focuses on problems with the hair, skin, and nails that can develop during cancer treatment. The dermatologist will order blood tests to check whether there are other reasons for your hair loss besides the effects of breast cancer treatments.

Thyroid problems, nutritional deficiencies, and other factors can play a role in hair loss. Some dermatologists may recommend certain nutritional supplements to help speed up hair growth. Always check with your oncologist before you start taking a nutritional supplement.

Biotin supplements should be avoided because they can cause you to have incorrect results from lab tests, such as cardiovascular diagnostic tests and hormone Tests. Some of the other products you might want to try for mild to moderate hair loss include:

- Hair products designed to cover bald spots and thinning areas of your hair
- Shampoos formulated for thinning hair.

The Emotional Impact of Hair Loss

Hair loss can be traumatic in part because it's so visible. You may feel that it reveals to the world that you're a cancer patient, threatening your privacy. And you may have to deal with it around the same time you're facing other unwanted changes to your body and appearance due to treatment. Of course, not everyone reacts to treatment-related hair loss in the same way. For some, it can be devastating, especially at the beginning. For others, it's a big inconvenience but it doesn't affect them as deeply.

Finding Support

If you're worried or upset about hair loss, try not to isolate yourself because you're Embarrassed, or have fear of being judged as superficial. Talk about your feelings with understanding friends and family members, a mental health professional, or a social worker at your local cancer center. Also, try seeking out an in-person support group or an online community for people with breast cancer. Connecting with others who are going through cancer treatment and experiencing hair loss can be particularly helpful, since they'll be able to relate to your experiences and offer advice.

Hair Loss and Children

If you have young children, you may be concerned about how they'll react to seeing you lose your hair as a side effect of chemotherapy. Experts say that no matter the age of your kids, it's best to prepare them before your hair falls out with honest, age-appropriate information about what to expect. Since kids often follow your lead, try not to get too upset yourself during the conversation. Reassure them that your hair will grow back. It might also make them feel better to participate in some of the things you're doing to prepare, such as picking out hats, scarves, or other head coverings, or shaving off your hair.

Hair Loss and Your Job

There tends to be a lot less stigma with being open about a cancer diagnosis in the workplace than there was even a generation ago. If you're planning to continue working or to job hunt during treatment, you'll likely find many colleagues understand what you're going through.

Still, it's up to you to decide how comfortable you feel telling your colleagues or others you interact with in your job about your diagnosis and treatment. If you've lost your hair and you want to maintain your privacy at work, you might choose to wear a wig that looks as close as possible to your natural hair and to otherwise conceal your hair loss (such as by penciling in your eyebrows). If you're not as concerned about privacy, you might wear a scarf or choose not to hide your hair loss. Do what makes you most comfortable.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while hair loss can be a challenging aspect of breast cancer treatment, understanding the causes, potential management strategies, and emotional impacts can help navigate this journey with greater resilience and confidence. Whether exploring options like scalp cooling systems, wigs, or scarves, seeking support from loved ones and fellow survivors, or maintaining open communication in professional settings, know that there are resources and communities available to help you through this experience. Remember, your strength and identity transcend the physical, and in embracing the journey, you are not alone.