

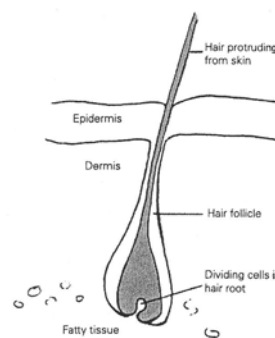
Hair Loss



This fact sheet has been produced by the Cancer Council Western Australia. It is not a substitute for talking to the doctors and nurses involved in your care but as a starting point, to help you ask questions.

Normal hair growth

Growth of the hair takes place in the hair follicles or roots. New hair cells form by division of cells in the follicle. The hair cells are joined together in long chains. The hair cells produce the keratin which accumulates inside the cells. The hair cells eventually die leaving packets of the hard, inert keratin linked together forming the hair. The newly forming cells in the follicle push the dead, keratin-containing cells ahead and so the hair grows.



Chemotherapy and hair loss

Chemotherapy is the use of drugs to reduce or stop the abnormal growth of cancer cells. These drugs work by disturbing the growth and division of cancer cells but in the process can also cause temporary damage to some normal cells especially those which rapidly divide such as in the hair follicles.

Not all chemotherapy drugs affect the hair. Ask your doctor if the drugs you are receiving are likely to cause hair loss. The amount of hair that is lost depends on the drug or combination of drugs given, the dose and your own individual reaction to the drug.

Hair loss may be so slight as to be hardly noticeable and sometimes it is apparent as an overall thinning of the hair. However some of the drugs will cause most people to lose most or all of their hair.

Hair loss may not only be from the scalp but can also occur from the eyebrows and eyelashes and the moustache and beard areas in men. Body hair from the armpits, chest and pubic areas may be lost as well.

Chemotherapy causes the hair to break off at or near the scalp. Shortly before the hair falls out you might experience some scalp irritation, discomfort or itchiness. You may then be aware of your hair loss when you brush, comb or wash it. Also when you wake in the morning you may notice hair on your pillow and sheets. At times the hair may fall out over a very short period of time (days).

Most often hair loss occurs in the first few weeks of treatment but may also occur at other times during treatment.

Radiotherapy and hair loss

Radiotherapy is the use of high energy x-rays to stop cancer cells from growing and multiplying. Normal cells in the path of the beam will also be affected and this can include the cells of the hair follicles.

Hair will only fall out in the area of the body being treated. For example, if you are having radiotherapy to your head you will probably lose some hair from your scalp. If the area being treated includes an armpit or on your chest, then it is only hair in these regions which is likely to fall out.

Will my hair grow back?

Hair loss is temporary in most cases. After chemotherapy your hair will regrow and this may happen even before your treatment has been completed. Often the first soft hairs reappear within a month or six weeks of stopping treatment and you can expect to have a reasonable head of hair three to six months later. You may notice some changes in your hair. It may be a little more curly, thicker or finer than it was before or it may grow back a slightly different colour.

When you finish radiotherapy your hair will usually grow back but it may not be as thick as before. The time it takes and the way it grows back depends on the dose of radiotherapy you have received and the duration of treatment. It is hard to give an exact time but your hair will usually have grown back within six to 12 months of completing your treatment. Occasionally after a large dose of radiotherapy the hair may not recover completely and new growth can be rather patchy.

A healthy diet will also encourage the growth of healthy hair.

Taking care of hair and scalp during treatment

The best advice is simple - keep your hair and scalp clean and be gentle with it.

Use gentle hair products such as baby shampoos which do not cause dryness of the hair and scalp. Comb or brush your hair gently, use a hairbrush with soft bristles. This is also helpful if your scalp feels tender.

Use a pillowcase with a smooth surface such as satin, polyester or cotton rather than nylon which may cause irritation. Wearing a hairnet or cap may help reduce the amount of hair loss from friction.

Your scalp may become sensitive during treatment. The skin may be more easily irritated than usual. Your hair is also likely to become brittle and prone to damage. The following activities may damage your hair or cause irritation to your scalp and should be avoided if possible:

- high heat such as with a hair dryer or rollers, as this will dry the hair and make it more likely to break
- plaiting or braiding your hair as this pulls and stretches the hair
- sleeping in hair rollers
- harsh chemicals such as hair colouring, particularly those containing ammonia products such as permanent hair colour
- some perms (see below)
- gels, mousses and hair sprays.

If using hair care products or treatments consider doing a patch test first.

If you have lost all your hair, you may find your scalp becomes flaky. This can be removed by gently rubbing the scalp with moist cotton wool. A mild anti-dandruff shampoo might help.

A gentle scalp massage can be invigorating and make you feel much better.

If you have lost hair under your armpits, avoid using perfumed deodorants and use a small amount of baby powder instead.

If you have any concerns discuss them with your doctor or nurses and follow any specific advice that they may give you.

Coping with hair loss

Your appearance is important and there are many things that you can do to help you feel good about yourself during a time when your appearance is changing. It makes good sense to plan ahead about how you will deal with possible hair loss.

At times you may feel many emotions about losing your hair. It can also be a constant reminder that you have cancer. These reactions are quite common and normal.

Talking about your feelings can be a helpful way of dealing with many of the emotions you experience. Depending on who you feel comfortable with, talk to a close friend or relative, your doctor or nurses or maybe someone who has already experienced hair loss.

You may also find it difficult to cope with other people's reactions to your hair loss. If you notice other people are ill at ease with you or feel too awkward to raise the subject, you may find it easier to start talking about your hair loss first. Keep in touch with friends and family, see them through all the different stages of your treatment. This will make your hair loss seem less traumatic or sudden.

Think about having your hair cut quite short before your treatment. It maybe helpful to cut your hair in stages as it gives you time to adjust to the loss of hair. Seeing your hair on the pillow can be upsetting and a visible sign that something is happening. You may wish to wear a hairnet, a soft cap or a towelling turban tied around your head at night to prevent hair falling on your bed.

Your hairdresser is a valuable ally. A hairdresser you know and trust will be able to help you maintain a well-groomed appearance during your treatment and give advice about your hair care needs. Your hairdresser can help you with thinning hair, partial hair loss and hair care during regrowth. For example, if your hair loss is partial talk to your hairdresser about different styling as careful styling can give the appearance of thicker hair. Wiglets or partial hairpieces can also be used to add additional body or to cover bald areas.

If treatment has caused thinning of your hair but it has not fallen out, a light perm could be useful. However some chemicals are harsh on delicate hair so check with your doctor about what is possible with the type of treatment you are having.

Some people choose to wear a wig, others prefer to use hats, scarves or other head coverings. Scarves usually need to be at least 50cm long to cover the scalp. Cotton, light-weight wools or blends are the best fabrics to use as nylon or silk tend to slip off the head too easily. A 'beanie' is always a popular hat among children and adults. Scarves can be tied in lots of different ways. Bucket or surfie hats are very popular with young people and they offer more protection for the face. Don't forget a bald head is very sensitive to sun damage, so it should be covered when out in the sun. Towelling turbans are very comfortable especially in the hot weather.

Draw attention away from your hair by highlighting other features. Bright shirts or sweaters or choosing clothes to blend with your wig colour can give you extra confidence. For women a little extra make-up around the eyes, cheekbones or lips will direct attention to your face as well as boost morale.

Look Good...Feel Better workshops are dedicated to teaching beauty techniques to help restore appearance and self image during treatment for cancer. Workshops are held regularly in metropolitan and some country areas. If you want information on *Look Good...Feel Better* workshops contact the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20.

Experiment with jewellery. Chains can emphasise the neckline while striking earrings can enhance a short hairstyle or look good with a hat or scarf.

The important thing is to do whatever makes you feel more comfortable and what gives you the most confidence.

Choosing a wig or hairpiece

The Cancer Council Wig Service, located at Crawford Lodge, Nedlands and Milroy Lodge, Shenton Park has an extensive range of new wigs in the latest styles and colours available at no cost, and for as long as required, during cancer treatment for metropolitan and country clients. Fully-trained volunteers are available to assist you with the selection, fitting and management of your wig. For further information or a copy of the Cancer Council Wig Service brochure contact the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20 or access www.cancerwa.asn.au/patients/support-and-services/wig-service/.

Wigs can be made from real hair or synthetic materials. Human hair wigs tend to be more expensive and need to be dry-cleaned and set about once a month. Synthetic wigs are less expensive, easier to style, wash easily, dry quickly and need less care. Synthetic wigs will only last about 9 months but this may be all you need. Both can look natural.

A hair prosthesis is the latest advance in replacing lost hair. It is made to meet the specific needs of each individual and is fitted to become part of you and designed to be styled as if it were your own hair. Prosthetic hair washes easily, dries quickly and needs minimal care. However the initial cost can be quite high and there are ongoing maintenance costs.

Before selecting a wig

You might like to ask your hairdresser's opinion about a style of wig that would suit you and whether it is possible to get it cut and styled for you. Visit a number of wig retailers (for a list of retailers call the Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20). It is important to investigate the range of wigs available.

Often it is advised that you order your wig early before you lose any hair, so that you have time to match it with your own style and colour. If you lose your hair more quickly than you expected, you are already prepared for your hair loss.

When buying a wig

It can be helpful to take a friend or a member of the family along with you. Have your hair cut and styled so that it will fit better under wigs that you try on. Try and get a wig that adjusts to any head size to take into account variations as you lose your hair.

Paying for a wig or hairpiece

If you are being treated at a public hospital you may be entitled to financial assistance towards the purchase of a wig. Ask your nurse or social worker for information. The Department of Veteran's Affairs will cover the total cost of a wig if you have full entitlements as a veteran.

Some health insurance funds will cover part of the cost of a wig if you are losing your hair due to disease or treatment. You will also need to have a letter from your doctor to accompany a claim. Check your entitlement with your own fund.

Who can help?

Talk to your doctor, nurse or social worker about the treatment you are having and possible side effects.

Your wig supplier will be able to give valuable information on caring for your wig, tips for holding it in place and practical issues in wearing a wig. Hairdressers and beauty therapists can give helpful advice on using make-up and accessories to minimise the visual effect of hair thinning or hair loss.

Cancer Council WA fosters and coordinates all aspects of the fight against cancer and is involved in the support of all who may be affected directly or indirectly by cancer. For further information about services and available resources contact the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20.