

Solutions for Women's Hair Loss

Treatments and transplants can boost thin tresses.

By Lisa Kovalovich



When you think of hair loss, what image comes to mind? If you're like most of us, it's probably not a picture of a healthy woman -- but by the age of 50, over 50 percent of women are experiencing some hair loss. And believe it or not, the solution isn't as simple as a bottle of Rogaine. In fact, there actually four types of hair loss common in women, each with its own appearance, causes, and treatments. We spoke to Matt L. Leavitt, MD, a board-certified dermatologist and author of *Women and Hair Loss* (www.womenandhairloss.com), for some insight:

Normal Hair Loss

For most women, it's normal to lose between 50 and 100 hairs a day, an amount that's usually unnoticeable. "But if you can see it," says Leavitt, "it's significant hair loss." And such significant hair loss requires diagnosis and treatment.

Four Types of Significant Hair Loss

1. Androgenetic Alopecia Women with this condition are genetically predisposed to it; that is, a gene has been passed down by either a woman's mother or father that makes certain hair follicles susceptible to hormonal influence. In androgenetic alopecia, the affected follicles' growth cycle shrinks, and hair in that growth cycle (called the anagen phase) begins to fall out. Eventually, hair gets finer as it grows in and can lose its pigment. Also called female pattern hair loss, androgenetic alopecia is a progressive condition, accounting for 85 percent of hair loss cases in women.

What it looks like: A diffuse thinning of hair across the top of the head, with the hairline intact.

How it's treated: "Androgenetic alopecia is difficult to treat," says Leavitt. But there are some options. Transplants, in which hairs from healthy scalp tissue are transplanted into thinning areas, are a great option for many women. "If done right, transplants look like natural hair," says Leavitt. Rogaine, an over-the-counter product that encourages hair growth, can help to a lesser extent.

2. Telogen Effluvium Telogen Effluvium means, literally, the shedding of hair in its resting (read: non-growth) phase. Unlike androgenetic alopecia, telogen effluvium isn't genetic; instead, it's caused by a host of things. These include acute stress, both physical and emotional; chronic illness, like cancer, diabetes, and liver disease; crash dieting; thyroid disease; anemia; and medications such as oral contraceptives and some heart medications.

What it looks like: Similar to androgenetic alopecia, telogen effluvium appears as a diffuse thinning of hair across the top of the head. The hairline is usually maintained.

How it's treated: "The treatment for telogen effluvium is to treat the cause," says Leavitt. So, for example, if thyroid disease is the cause, going on thyroid medication will help. Leavitt notes that it takes about three months to see a difference in the hair loss, and about six months to regrow the hair. Rogaine can also help minimally here.

3. Alopecia Areata Usually thought of as an autoimmune problem, alopecia areata occurs when the body doesn't recognize its own hair follicles and sends inflammatory cells to attack them. Leavitt notes that women with alopecia areata aren't ill and don't have compromised immune systems, however.

What it looks like: Round patches of hair loss surrounded by otherwise thick hair.

How it's treated: Topical treatments like Rogaine are a favorite here. Other complementary treatments include injectable steroid solution, to reduce inflammation; and scalp sensitizers, to shock the immune system into allowing hair to grow again.

4. Traction Alopecia Traction alopecia is a common problem among women who wear very tight braids or ponytails. With this condition, hair is literally pulled out of the scalp by constant tension on the hair. If that tension isn't reduced, traction alopecia can become permanent.

What it looks like: Traction alopecia usually shows up at the hairline, often on the sides of the head.

How it's treated: By changing your hairstyle. Experiment with looser looks to give hair a chance to rest.

A Treatment on the Horizon

According to Leavitt, a pioneer in the women's hair loss field, laser treatment is an up-and-coming option. "We're looking into a laser that can modulate cells and grow hair," he says. While this option has not yet been perfected, it may be in coming years.