

VEGF Grows Thicker Hair

Posted by : admin on Oct 09, 2007 - 11:36 AM

New Research

If an experiment in mice works in men, it may be possible to grow thicker hair, scientists in Boston said on Thursday...No more comb-overs. An end to hair plugs. Rugs go back on the floor where they belong. If an experiment in mice works in men, it may be possible to grow thicker hair, scientists in Boston said on Thursday...They said they found a protein normally associated with blood vessel growth that makes hair follicles bigger. Just as a chimp looks hairier than a person with the same number of hair follicles because of its thicker strands of hair, balding men could be given thicker manes, the researchers said.

"In male pattern hair loss, it's not that the follicles are gone. They're just miniature follicles," Dr. Michael Detmar, associate professor of dermatology at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, who led the study, said in a statement. "If anyone could find a way to make the follicles bigger, men might grow hair again."

The key, he and colleagues report in the Feb. 19 issue of the Journal of Clinical Investigation, might be a protein called VEGF now used experimentally to help people grow their own heart bypasses. VEGF, or vascular endothelial growth factor, helps the body grow blood vessels. It can help heart disease patients and is one of the proteins blocked in certain experimental anti-cancer therapies aimed at starving out tumors.

BLOOD CIRCULATION KEY TO THICK HAIR

But as any barber will attest, blood circulation is also associated with hair growth. Some studies have tended to support this, finding that people with hair loss may have fewer blood vessels. Detmar's team, which included dermatology researcher Kiichiro Yano, compared two groups of mice -- one "wild-type" and the other genetically bred to produce extra VEGF.

The mice with extra VEGF grew fur faster and thicker in the first two weeks of life, they found. When they were shaved at two months, they grew back fur that was 70 percent thicker than normal mice. Blood vessels surrounding their fur follicles were also larger, the researchers reported. And when they treated normal mice with a drug that blocks VEGF, their fur grew in thin and with bald spots.

"So by modulating VEGF, we can directly influence the size of the hair," Detmar said. They are now working on a way to get VEGF into the scalp in a cream or ointment. "The question now is can we, by this method, improve hair growth in humans?" he said. "Applying it to humans will be the big challenge."

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