

Hair Loss: Pattern Baldness or Poor Health?

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Editorials

Differentiating between traditional hair loss causes and nutritional or health causes Article differentiating between traditional hair loss, and hair loss caused by nutritional deficiencies or poor health, in this article by HairlossTalk's science writer, Dr. Deborah O'Neil... **Regular versus symptomatic hair loss**

Pattern hair loss is an affliction of the healthy. It's bad luck and can cause a great deal of upset. In almost all cases however, it won't otherwise impact your physical health in any way. Where thinning or complete loss of hair occurs alongside, or following, symptoms of ill health, is sudden or markedly different from classical pattern-balding, causes any pain or itching or involves changes in the underlying scalp skin, it may be an indication of one of many health problems. In such cases, you should always consult your physician and get checked out by a specialist dermatologist for an accurate diagnosis to establish the nature and cause of your hair loss and, should it prove to be a symptom of any illness, start appropriate treatment as soon as possible.

A word to the wise

We should stress again that it is highly unlikely that your hair loss is anything else but pattern baldness. Chances are, you're fighting fit, with a healthy body and scalp. Beware of anyone other than a trained, medical professional who tells you otherwise. Do not be sucked into the trap of being conned that your hair loss is merely symptomatic and can be reversed by a number of potions and lotions that contain such things as "Nutrients for the hair and body". It's not unheard of for those who peddle these useless pseudo-remedies to convince consumers that their loss is a result of ringworm, too much sebum, or a lack of nutrients in the scalp. The typical person has no nutritional deficiencies significant enough to affect hair growth, and a simple multivitamin can replenish what is lacking.

Dietary deficiencies and gastrointestinal conditions

Temporary hair loss or thinning (alopecia) can be triggered by a number of nutritional deficiencies. Follicles require the full complement of nutrients in the same way as other tissues and organs throughout the body. Depriving them of a number of dietary-derived factors can cause an arrest in hair production. Zinc deficiency is fairly common, even throughout the developed world, and may result in hair loss. Although less common, vitamin B7 (Biotin) deficiency is also associated with hair loss.

Thinning is a well-recognized symptom of anemia caused by iron deficiencies. This form of anemia is a condition in which the oxygen carrying capacity of red blood cells is impaired because they cannot produce enough hemoglobin, an iron-based chemical that transports oxygen around the body. Along with other cells and tissues, the hair follicles are starved of a proportion of the oxygen they need for optimal cell function and hair genesis and so will shut down production. Crash dieting and faddy diet trends are partly responsible for the recent increase in iron-deficiencies. Vegetarian diets can also lead to iron deficiency if not balanced with sufficient pulses, beans and greens. Any fully balanced diet should provide the necessary range of nutrients, vitamins and minerals, but high quality supplements are a good idea to restore balance

or to provide an extra source during times when you might need a boost.

The damage caused to the lining of the gastrointestinal tract by chronic inflammatory bowel disease (Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis) and celiac disease severely impairs the capacity for nutrients to be absorbed across the gut wall and into the body. This malabsorption can result in a number of vitamin and mineral deficiencies, all of which can trigger hair loss in the same way as dietary deficiencies can. In contrast, this secondary form of deficiency cannot be corrected by dietary modification without first treating the underlying intestinal disease.

The endocrine system

Hormones are a major determinant in both normal and abnormal hair loss and re-growth cycles. The endocrine system is a complicated, dynamic network of hormones produced by a range of tissues and organs throughout the body. Changes in any one hormone can impact levels and the function of other hormones within this body-wide network. As such, most hormonal imbalances can trigger hair loss.

Thinning is a major symptom of thyroid disease, in which levels of production of thyroxine, one of the 'master hormones' of the endocrine system, will alter. This is true for hyperthyroidism (conditions of overactive thyroid function) and hypothyroidism (underactive thyroid), as in both cases, the hormones that regulate hair growth will be impacted as a downstream consequence (rather like a domino wave) of changes in thyroid control.

Stress, shock or trauma can also result in hair loss. Also called Telogen Effluvium, this form of hair loss usually occurs three or so months after the trigger event. This occurs because the response mounted by the body in response to these situations involves the release of massive amounts of adrenal and even androgenic hormones. Sensitive follicles arrest and hair ceases to be produced (complete baldness can sometimes result, in both men and women). Growth is generally completely restored once the trigger episode wanes.

In women, major shifts in the balance of reproductive hormones can result in hair loss. As such, pregnancy, menopause and childbirth all commonly result in thinning or more sudden hair loss. A good deal of hair can be lost during the first six post-natal months, but this usually re-grows normally once hormone levels settle down back to normal. Similarly, oral contraceptives (birth control pills), patches and contraceptive injections can trigger female hair loss. This is because many contain androgenic progestogen (a progesterone chemically similar to testosterone), a hormone that can render follicles sensitive to, albeit reversible, arrest.

Tumors of hormone producing organs such as the ovaries, testes and adrenal glands, will result in the massive, uncontrolled production of alopecia-triggering androgenic hormones and as a consequence, can trigger hair loss in both men and women. Although rare, hormone-secreting tumors are the most serious and insidious causes of hormone imbalances.

Medications and treatments

Hair loss is a side effect of a number of commonly used medications. In fact, as many as 200 medicines and drugs list hair loss as a possible side effect. These include commonly prescribed blood pressure medications, anti-depressants and blood thinning drugs. Your doctor or pharmacist should advise you if hair loss is expected with any medication they prescribe. You can always check the technical insert supplied with any drug to see if this if this may be a more rare risk factor. Cytotoxic drugs used in cancer chemotherapy kill follicle cells as well as cancer cells, so hair loss with these treatments is common. Radiation therapy can also result in sufficient

follicular damage to induce arrest and consequent hair loss.

Scalp disease and infection

A number of skin diseases and infections of the scalp can cause significant enough inflammation and damage within and around follicles to arrest hair growth. In these cases, hair loss is usually accompanied by itching, pain, redness and swelling of the underlying skin. Severe psoriasis or atopic dermatitis (eczema) can both impact the scalp in this way. These relapsing-remitting diseases need to be treated before the hair loss is reversed. Keeping the inflammation they trigger under control is the best way to prevent attacks that are severe enough to result in hair-loss. Ringworm (Tinea capitis), is a contagious infection of the scalp by a mold-like fungi called dermatophytes, can also lead to areas of baldness. In these cases, the hair is broken off at the root, not actually missing. In addition to swelling and redness, the presence of round, scaly, gray patches, often with small black dots, within areas of thinning scalp are indicative of ringworm and the need for treatment with appropriate antifungals.

Conclusion

If you believe that your hair loss is not simply pattern thinning or baldness, it's imperative that you get it checked as soon as possible out to rule out the chances of it being a symptom of an undiagnosed disease or illness. Hair loss can be indicative of a range of dietary deficiencies and gastrointestinal conditions, endocrine (hormone) imbalances, skin disease and infection and may also be a side effect of any number of medications. In most cases, a simple blood test and brief history taken by your doctor, combined with examination of your scalp, will reveal whether there is more to your hair loss than a combination of genes, androgens and bad luck. The good news is that symptomatic hair loss is almost always reversible. If the cause is treated, the hair will grow back again.