

# **Cancer Treatments and Hair Loss**

## **Chemotherapy**

Chemotherapy destroys cancer cells by attacking the cancer cells and disrupting their growth. Unfortunately, it can also affect the normal cells in the body, including the cells of the hair follicles. This causes hair loss. Unlike cancer cells, however, the normal cells quickly recover, so if you lose your hair as a result of chemotherapy it will grow back once your treatment is over.

Not all types of chemotherapy cause hair loss. Some people, however, have temporary, partial or complete baldness. Some chemotherapy drugs cause other body hair to fall out, such as eyebrows, eyelashes, chest, underarm, leg and pubic hair. The amount of hair lost, if any, depends on the drug or combination of drugs used, the dosage given and the way that your body reacts to the drug.

If hair loss is going to occur, it usually starts within a few weeks of starting the chemotherapy, although very occasionally it can happen within a few days. For some people their hair may just thin and become dry and break easily. For other people the hair may continue to fall out over a couple of weeks so that they become completely bald. Sometimes the hair is lost very quickly over 1–2 days once it starts to fall out, which can be very shocking.

## **How will my hair grow back after chemotherapy?**

Your hair may even begin to grow before you finish your treatment. At first the hair is very fine but you will probably have a full head of hair after 3–6 months. You may find that your new hair is curlier or finer than it was before or it may be a slightly different color. Sometimes it may be a mixture of dark and grey hair.

## **Your Feelings about Hair Loss**

Many people see their hair as a very important part of their appearance. For some people, losing their hair can cause very strong emotions, such as anger and depression. While you are going through treatment and having to cope with many changes to your life, losing your hair may seem like the final straw. It can also act as a constant reminder that you have cancer and may make you feel vulnerable and exposed. These reactions are completely normal. It may take a while, to come to terms with hair loss.

At first you may feel reluctant to go out and continue with your social life, but as you spend more time with other people your confidence may grow and help you to cope with the situation.

People often worry that their children will be scared if they see them without their hair, but children often accept such changes quite easily.

## **Practical help to cope with hair loss and looking after your hair**

There are some practical ways to cope with hair loss. While they don't make the problem disappear, they can make life a little easier for you during this difficult time.

- You could consider having your hair cut short before your treatment starts. This may help to minimize hair loss as it reduces the weight of hair pulling on

the scalp. If you are used to long hair you might find it easier to have it cut in stages to give you time to adjust to a new length.

- Use only gentle hair products, such as mild or baby shampoo, to prevent dryness of the hair and scalp.
- Brush your hair gently – using a soft baby brush, for example – particularly if your scalp feels tender. Use wide-toothed combs.
- At night, wearing a hairnet, soft cap or turban around your head will collect any loose hairs.
- Avoid using excessive heat from hairdryers or heated rollers, as this can over-dry the hair and make it break.
- Avoid braiding your hair or wearing it in a tight band, as this can damage and break your hair.
- A poor diet and stress can make the condition of your hair worse, so eating as well as you can with plenty of fruit and vegetables can help to keep your hair in good condition.
- Gently massaging the scalp may improve the blood supply to the hair follicles.
- Only use tints or hair dyes made of natural colorants.
- In looking after your skin, use un-perfumed moisturizer or natural oils on your scalp. Avoid using deodorants if you have lost hair under your arms but you can use baby powder or natural crystal deodorants.

## **Headwear**

Wearing a hat, scarf, turban or wig is a good way of covering the hair loss. Some of you will already wear a scarf or turban when outside, but you may feel self-conscious about your hair loss in front of your friends and family.

## **Wigs and Hairpieces**

One practical way of coping with hair loss whether at home or outside is to wear a wig or hairpiece. Here are some helpful tips.

- Some people like to choose their wig before they have lost their hair so that they can match the style and color. The advantage of this approach is that if you lose your hair more quickly than expected you will already be prepared
- Choose the same volume of hair as you had before.
- Choose your own color or one shade lighter. Generally a change to a lighter color will be less noticeable.
- Because the lining of the wig can irritate the scalp, it may be helpful to wear a thin cotton scarf or skull-cap underneath. These are usually available from wig suppliers

**BCFE has a small number of wigs. Please contact the office for advice.**

## **As your hair grows back**

When your hair first grows back it will be very fine but will gradually become thicker. As soon as it is long enough to style, you may feel that you no longer want to wear a wig or other head covering. People who were used to long hair often find a shorter style that suits them.

**BCFE accept donations of new or nearly-new wigs in a clean and good condition.**

**Information taken from CancerBACUP 2003.**