Care for Your Hair

Tips for managing treatment-related hair loss and thinning

September 14, 2020 By Kate Ferguson

One of the most upsetting side effects of cancer treatment is hair loss (alopecia). This most commonly affects the scalp but may also affect the eyebrows and eyelashes as well as armpit, leg and pubic hair. It's normal to fear losing some or all of your hair, but there are steps you can take to minimize the damage and look your best.

Understand how treatment may affect your hair. Many chemotherapy drugs and radiation treatments to the scalp damage healthy cells, including hair follicles, along with cancer cells. Ask your medical team whether you should expect hair loss from your treatment and how quickly this might happen. The good news is that hair lost from anywhere on the body almost always grows back, usually one to three months after chemo ends.

Check out cooling caps. Food and Drug Administration–approved ice caps can help save hair. During a chemotherapy infusion, you wear a cap that circulates cooled liquid controlled by a computer; a second cap keeps the cold from escaping. The cold restricts blood vessels in the scalp so little or no chemo agents reach the hair follicles, which helps mitigate hair loss. Side effects may include headaches, chills and scalp pain. Ask your cancer care team whether this might be a good option for you and whether insurance will cover it. Some nonprofits help pay for cooling caps.

Learn to care for your hair and scalp after treatment. Handle hair gently with minimal use of heat appliances. Many people shave their heads. If your scalp is exposed, protect it from heat, cold and sun with a hat or scarf and opt for a broad-spectrum sunscreen with an SPF of at least 30.

Cover in style. Wigs may be covered by insurance if a prescription is written for a "cranial prosthesis." Trendy scarves, caps or wraps made from breathable, soft fabrics, such as cotton or bamboo rayon, may also be partially or fully covered by insurance, so be sure to check.

Prepare for your new hair. Once hair grows back, its thickness, texture or color may differ—a change that might be fleeting or permanent. Fragile new hair may break easily, so avoid perms and dyes for the first few months.

5 Key Hair Care Tips

1. Ask your care team whether your treatment might trigger hair loss and, if so, what to expect.

2. Consider scalp cooling, which may minimize or prevent treatment-related hair loss.
3. Be gentle with your hair after treatment; protect exposed scalp from heat, cold and sun.
4. Ask about programs that offer free or inexpensive wigs or other head coverings.
5. Avoid harsh treatments, such as perms and dyes, for the first few months.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.