

MID-LIFE CHALLENGE: HAIR LOSS

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Have you found yourself dreading looking at the drain after a shower lately? Are you starting to count the hairs you find in the tub? We all lose hair on a regular basis, but many women at mid-life find their head of hair actually thinning as their estrogen levels fall. Women who already have thin hair tend to panic as they see themselves growing bald.

Hair grows consistently unless something interrupts the growth center, or hair follicle, such as hormone imbalance or genetic programming. Hair growth can also slow down as the follicle rests for a few months. To determine the nature of the problem, a dermatologist will want to take a thorough history, so it helps to pay attention to your profile of hair loss.

1. Temporary Hair Loss:

No particular pattern to the thinning

Can be sudden or gradual

Can be caused by:

a. Medications

- Chemotherapy
- Beta-blockers for high blood pressure or rapid heart rate
- Stomach acid blockers
- Birth control pills
- Accutane for acne
- Some anti-depressants
- Testosterone therapy

b. Health Problems

- Thyroid disorders
- Dandruff
- Hormone imbalance from stress or menopause
- Poor nutrition or eating disorder
- Trauma or traction including braids/corn-rows left constantly in

Treatment: finding the cause and correcting it

Regrowth Time: 2 to 6 weeks

2. Hereditary Hair Loss

Gradual, progressive thinning especially at crown of head

Most often starts in 30s and 40s with falling estrogen levels

Can be caused by:

- a. genetic predisposition (excess 5-alpha reductase which converts testosterone in hair follicle to dihydrotestosterone (DHT) which causes hair follicles to shrink.)

Can be treated by:

- a) **Spironolactone** (aladctone) diuretic often combined with other treatments inhibits testosterone action.
Regrowth Time: 3 – 4 months
Cost: \$45/month – need prescription
- b) **Minoxidil 2%** (Rogaine for Women) prolongs hair growth phase and reverses shrinking follicles.
Regrowth Time: 8 to 12 months with application 2x/day
Cost: \$25/mo – over the counter
- c) **Minoxidil 5%** (Rogaine Extra Strength for Men) pending FDA approval for women, most dermatologist consider it safe for women. 46% more effective than 2% solution, works twice as quickly.
Regrowth Time: within 2 months, may cause itchy, dry skin.
If you stop using it you lose growth.
Cost: \$30/month – need prescription
- d) **Tretinoin** (Retina A) promotes absorption of minoxidil into hair follicles – derivative of Vitamin A – need prescription.
- e) **Finasteride** (Propecia) – approved for men by FDA – pill form. Testing on postmenopausal women recently completed. Blocks production of 5 alpha reductase. May cause birth defects in women and may depress sex drive in men.
Regrowth Time: about 3 months
If you stop using it you lose growth
Cost: \$45/month – need prescription

3. Patchy Hair Loss

Patches of alopecia appear from dime-size to total baldness. Onset is unpredictable but over 2 million American women have experienced it.

Chronic immune disorder: the body's immune cells fight hair follicles causing them to stop producing hair. Dermatologists often treat with steroids injected into the scalp or taken orally. Minoxidil 5% is often used as well. Complications of steroid use include high blood pressure, cataracts, stomach ulcers and osteoporosis.

Regrowth Time: 1-2 months with steroids
Cost: Oral - less than \$20
Injections - \$50-\$100 per treatment
Prescription only

Herbal remedies might also help. James A. Duke, PhD botanist and author of The Green Pharmacy writes that although no studies have shown herbal treatments prevent hair loss or promote growth, the most promising approaches from anecdotal evidence include:

- a) Saw Palmetto
blocks formation of DHT comes in pill form, follow the label dose
- b) Licorice
prevents conversion of testosterone to DHT, comes in liquid solution and taken orally or added to shampoo. Monitor blood pressure closely – may cause high blood pressure, follow the label dose.
- c) Horsetail
rich in selenium and silicon, helps promote circulation to the scalp. Add dried Horsetail to herbal tea, follow label dose.
- d) Safflower
opens blood vessels in scalp. Massage scalp with safflower oil or add to shampoo.

Before trying any herb, take a small dose to see how your body responds. If you experience headache, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, hives or a rash, discontinue use. Be sure to let your health care provider know what you plan to take to avoid any dangerous interaction with medications you may be taking.

The American Hair Council can provide information at www.ahlc.org.

If you find yourself thinking a lot about your hair and fretting about hair loss, see a dermatologist and work with your health care provider. Many times acupuncture and nutritional changes are what is needed, but action is better than worrying about it.