



Hair today, no

Losing your hair is no fun, but if it happens at a young age it can be particularly traumatic. We look at the causes and treatments available

'NO ONE COULD TELL THE DIFFERENCE'

Robin Davies 64,
retired engineer

Robin Davies decided to try a hair-restoring lotion when he noticed he was starting to lose his hair. 'I had a rather uncharacteristic attack of vanity when I saw my bald patch on TV, and decided to give Regaine a try,' he said. Before he started the treatment, Robin enlisted the help of his wife and asked her to photograph

his bald patch. After a few months of Robin using Regaine, they recreated the scene.

Robin said: 'I made sure we used the same pose and lighting and the films were processed in the same way.' Photos developed, Robin gathered his friends and family and asked them to study the before and after images. The verdict? 'No one could tell the difference!'

HAIR LOSS – YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Confused about hair loss? Don't pull the rest of your hair out – we answer your questions

Q We all lose our hair when we get older, don't we?

A The average person has about 100,000 hairs on their scalp. The 50 to 100 hairs we lose each day are generally replenished when they fall out – it is when this process begins to slow that most people notice significant hair loss.

The most common type is male pattern baldness, which starts to become apparent for many men in their 20s and 30s. A receding hairline is the first sign, and then the hair on top of the head starts to thin.

Women can be affected by 'female pattern baldness', but the onset is

later – typically around menopausal age. With women, hair tends to start thinning on the top of the head. Female pattern baldness can often be treated with hormones – visit your GP for advice.

Q A friend told me it is common for women who've recently given birth to suffer some hair loss. Is this correct and, if so, why?

A Pregnant women often describe how glossy and thick their hair becomes during pregnancy. This is due to a change in hormone levels. After the baby is born, hormone levels begin to return to normal and because so many hairs are at the same growing phase, they

will tend to fall out simultaneously.

If this happens, don't panic – your hair should get back to normal and stop thinning within three months. For some women, though, it may take longer.

Q I've heard a lot about the problem of alopecia recently. What exactly is it and can it be treated?

A Alopecia is a catch-all word for any type of hair loss. It is usually applied to cases of rapid hair loss and the experiences of the TV presenter Gail Porter (above right) have brought it to public attention.

Alopecia areata – hair loss in patches – is the most common form.



Alopecia UK estimates that around 1.7 per cent of the population suffers. Causes of alopecia vary – there are some suggestions that

it is a disease of the auto-immune system but stress and genetics may also have some impact. There are treatments available but it is important that you visit your GP in the first instance to get a diagnosis and rule out any underlying causes. For information and advice, contact Alopecia UK (www.alopaciaonline.org.uk) and Alopecia Awareness (a support group based in the South West – www.alopicia-awareness.org.uk).

Q Is it true that bald men have extra testosterone?

A Testosterone does have a part to play in male hair loss, but it doesn't necessarily follow that bald men have more of it. Male pattern baldness is caused when certain areas of the scalp become more sensitive to testosterone – the follicles begin to shrink and eventually the hair stops growing there.

Q Is it true that I need to study my mother's family to see if I am going to lose my hair?

A Hair loss is often genetic and it can be passed on by either parent, but the strongest influence is on the maternal side. If hair loss runs in the family, you are likely to be affected.



ne tomorrow

I'm sick of being fobbed off, and tired of being told "don't worry about it". How can I not worry about it? I'm a 28-year-old woman, I've got bald patches and no one seems able to tell me why.'

Leanne Flavell, who has now created a support group for fellow sufferers (see 'Wigs', right) is not alone. Millions of men and women, of all ages, have experienced hair loss. Our latest survey showed that almost six in ten men and 17 per cent of women have lost some of their hair.

Given the upset it can cause, it's not surprising that many of those affected go in search of a cure – or at least a cover-up. According to our survey, 35 per cent of women who suffer hair loss seek treatment compared with around six per cent of men – but those men who do spend money attempting to solve their problem end up spending more than women. Men spend an average £370 on various remedies, whereas women spend only half that amount.

What next?

New tests offer hope of a cure

It is believed that genetics play a part in hair loss but until recently no one had identified the link. Late last year, researchers in the US found that bald people and animals have a 'hairless' gene. When they replaced it with a 'normal' gene in bald mice, the mice grew back some of their hair. Long term, it may be possible to conduct similar gene therapy on humans.

In October, the UK government gave funding to another new treatment that should be on the market by 2010. It involves growing hair cells in a lab and then transferring them to the scalp using a series of tiny injections.

Our research

In July we sent an online questionnaire to 2,000 *Which?* members. Thanks to all 1,220 of you who responded.

Lotions, potions and cover-ups

We compare the cost and effectiveness of the three main types of treatment

Hair restorers

What are they?

There are two types of medication that are generally accepted to help with some types of hair loss.

The first, minoxidil, is a lotion sold under the brand name Regaine. It is available in high-street chemists.

The second, finasteride, is available as the prescription drug Propecia. The tablets are available only on private prescription (your GP can prescribe them to you but you'll have to pay the full cost) and should be taken only by men.



How much do they cost?

Regaine £19 to £30 (depending on strength) for a month's supply.

Propecia Around £40 a month.

How well do they work?

About 60 per cent of men will notice some hair growth after three months using Regaine. However, you will need to use the treatment on a continuing basis to retain any regrowth. Eight in ten men may be helped by Propecia but there can be side effects and, as with Regaine, the effects disappear if medication stops.

Wigs

What are they?

Pop stars like Madonna (right) wear wigs for fun but they are no laughing matter for the estimated 100,000 people in the UK currently wearing one. If you suffer from alopecia that can't easily be disguised you may qualify for one on the NHS. You will need to have a prescription from a dermatologist at your local hospital (ask your GP to refer you).

However, if you live in Scotland you have to pay only £6.55 for the cheapest wigs. If you live in Wales, contact your local health trust. Leanne Flavell, who formed Alopecia Awareness in 2005, is angry about NHS wig provision: 'I get two synthetic wigs a year but they wear out well before they are supposed to.'



How much do they cost?

NHS charges in England vary from £50 to around £200, depending on the type of wig.

How well do they work?

Human hair wigs look very natural but are more expensive than synthetic ones. Synthetic wigs keep their shape but can be damaged by heat.

Hair surgery

What is it?

Having surgery to correct hair loss might be considered the last straw, but for many people it may provide the only permanent solution to an upsetting problem.

Hair micro-grafting is probably still the most popular technique. Follicles are grafted from a part of the head where hair still grows and implanted into the bald patch.

is qualified. Marilyn Sherlock, of the Institute of Trichologists, says: 'Look for the letters AIT, MIT or FIT to ensure they are an institute member.' Also check that the establishment you are talking to is registered with the Healthcare Commission – you can do this by visiting the website www.healthcarecommission.org.uk.

How well does it work?

Hair follicles grafted on to a front-receding hair-line can look odd – most work better on the crown. You will need regular appointments to keep the grafts looking their best.