

Hair loss

Information for people affected by cancer

This fact sheet provides information on hair loss that may result as a side effect of cancer treatment. Not all cancer treatment causes hair loss.

Cancer treatment and hair loss

Any treatment which acts on rapidly dividing cancer cells can also affect other rapidly dividing cells such as hair follicles (roots). Talk to your doctors and nurses before treatment starts about whether you are likely to lose your hair, and if so, the level of hair loss to be expected.

Chemotherapy and hair loss

Chemotherapy is the use of drugs to reduce or stop the abnormal growth of cancer cells. Depending on what type of chemotherapy you receive you may experience complete hair loss, hair thinning or no impact on your hair at all. Chemotherapy drugs are usually given in cycles and the amount of hair loss depends on the type of drug, the dose and the timing of treatment.

Hair loss can occur anywhere on the body including the scalp, eyebrows, eyelashes, chest, underarms, face and pubic area.

Chemotherapy may cause the hair on your head to break off at or near the scalp. Shortly before the hair falls out you might feel some scalp irritation, discomfort or itchiness. You may notice fallen hair on your pillow and sheets and when you brush or wash it. The hair may fall out over a very short period of time (days). It is common for hair loss to begin two to three weeks after starting treatment. Eyelashes and eyebrows may take longer to fall out.

“I thought I would keep my eyelashes and eyebrows. They fell out weeks after my hair - it was a shock all over again.”

- Nina

Cold caps

Cold caps or scalp cooling may help reduce the amount of hair loss for some individuals. They work by narrowing the blood vessels and reducing the amount of chemotherapy reaching the scalp. Not all treatment centres offer these as they can be expensive and are not always successful. Scalp cooling is not suitable for everyone so you will need to check with your health professional.

Radiation therapy and hair loss

Also known as radiotherapy, radiation therapy uses a controlled dose of radiation to kill cancer cells or damage them so they cannot grow, multiply or spread. If you have hair in the area being treated, you may lose some or all of it during or just after radiation therapy. Hair regrowth or thickening may start within a few weeks of finishing treatment, but sometimes hair loss may be permanent.

Hair will only fall out in the area of the body being treated. For example, if you are having radiation therapy to your head you will probably lose some hair from your scalp. If the area being treated includes an armpit or your chest, then it is only hair in these regions that is likely to fall out.

Managing hair loss

If you have hair loss, you may experience a range of different emotions including anger, anxiety and acceptance. Some people may feel self-conscious about their appearance and other people find that it is not as bad as they expected. Experiencing a variety of feelings and reactions is very common.

“Losing my hair was the hardest, saddest and most emotional side effect to my treatment. I lost my confidence and my identity when I lost my hair. As a hairdresser my hair was such a major part of ‘me’!” - Tania

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Some people don't know how to react to your hair loss. If you are uncomfortable talking about it, give a simple response, for example "I'm having some treatment for my health and this is the side effect."

You may also want to help children if they have feelings of fear or anxiety. See our Talking to Kids about Cancer booklet for tips on tips on how to talk to children about the changes cancer treatment may cause, including hair loss. This booklet is available via your local Cancer Council website to download, or call Cancer Council 13 11 20 for a copy and other recommended resources.

Taking back some control

Being prepared, talking about how you feel and planning ahead for how to deal with the possibility of treatment-related hair loss may be helpful.

- Consider cutting your hair before treatment starts to give yourself time to adjust. Some people cut their hair short, while others prefer to cut their hair in stages.
- Some people choose to shave their head at the early stages of hair loss when they start to notice larger amounts of hair falling out.

Taking care of hair and scalp during and after treatment

If you have lost your hair:

- gentle massage and moisturising of the scalp using a non-perfumed lotion or emollient can help reduce flaky areas
- protect your scalp from the sun with sunscreen, a scarf or hat
- use a pillow case made from a smooth fabric such as polycotton, cotton sateen or bamboo
- you may like to wear a soft cap, beanie or turban to keep your head warm.

If your scalp is sensitive and your hair is thin:

- use a gentle shampoo and conditioner
- brush your hair gently with a soft bristle brush
- dry your hair naturally or use a cool setting on the hair dryer
- avoid heated rollers, curling wands or straightening irons
- avoid harsh chemicals such as hair colouring, gel, mousse and perming agent.

If you have lost underarm hair avoid perfumed deodorants.

tip

If you have any concerns, discuss them with your health professional or call Cancer Council 13 11 20 for more information.

Wigs and headwear

Some people choose to wear a wig, hat, scarf, turban or beanie after losing their hair; others prefer not to cover their head at all. The important thing is to do whatever makes you feel comfortable and gives you the most confidence.

- A beanie, soft cap or turban is often a comfortable choice; a wide brimmed hat offers more sun protection.
- Scarves usually need to be at least 50 cm long to cover the scalp. Cotton, lightweight wools or blends are the best fabrics to use, as nylon or silk tend to slip off the head too easily.
- Scarves and turbans can be styled in many different ways. You may want to search the internet and your local Cancer Council website for tips and tutorial videos on wigs to suit your face shape and how to style headwear.

Types of wigs and hairpieces

- **Human hair wigs or hairpieces** - tend to be more expensive, need to be washed and can be styled like normal hair with hot rollers, curling wands and straighteners. They can be trimmed and coloured darker but not lighter, are heavier and will last longer.
- **Synthetic wigs or hairpieces** - are less expensive, lighter, dry quickly and need less care. They can't be restyled or recoloured but they can be trimmed. If you look after a synthetic wig it will last for as long as you may need it.

Selecting a wig

- If you want to match your wig to your usual colour and style, it's a good idea to start looking before treatment starts and hair loss begins or take along a photo from before hair loss began. Some people like to try something different and choose a different style and colour.
- Take a friend or family member along with you for support and to help you choose your wig.

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- Contact your local Cancer Council on 13 11 20 to ask if they offer a free wig service which may include a wig postal service.
- Ask your hairdresser or speak to a consultant at a wig salon about a style of wig that would suit you. There may be a cost involved for a wig consultation. Remember to ask about the cost when making an appointment or before making your decision.
- Look for a wig that adjusts to any head size to allow for variations as you lose your hair. Some people choose a wig after hair loss as this can often provide a better fit.
- Visit specialty wig suppliers who are experienced in fitting wigs for people having cancer treatment. Contact Cancer Council on 13 11 20 or search the internet for suppliers.

Paying for a wig or hairpiece

You may be able to get assistance with the cost of your wig or hairpiece.

- **Treatment in a public hospital** - you may be eligible for financial assistance towards the purchase of a wig. Ask your nurse or social worker for information.
- **Health insurance funds** - some funds will cover part of the cost of a wig if you lose your hair due to disease or treatment. You will need a letter from your doctor to accompany a claim. Before you buy your wig, check what your fund will pay.
- **Department of Veterans' Affairs** - veterans may be eligible to have the cost of a wig covered.

After treatment

Hair loss is usually temporary. Talk to your doctor about what to expect after your treatment.

After chemotherapy your hair will grow back. Often the first soft hairs reappear within a month or six weeks of treatment ending. Hair usually grows about 1cm every 28 days. You can expect to have a reasonable head of hair four to 12 months later.

When you finish radiation therapy your hair will usually grow back. The time it takes and the way it grows back depends on the dose of radiation you received. Hair usually grows back a few months after treatment. Occasionally after a large dose of radiation therapy the hair may not recover completely, new growth can be patchy and there may be some permanent hair loss.

As your hair grows back you may notice some changes. It may be curlier, thicker or finer than it was before treatment or it may grow back a different colour. A hairdresser may be able to help you manage thinning hair and hair care during regrowth. If your hair loss is partial, talk to your hairdresser about different styling to give the appearance of thicker hair. Hairpieces can be effective in covering partial hair loss.

Seek advice from a professional about how soon after treatment you can colour your regrown hair and the colours or products that may be suitable for you. If your scalp is sensitive, your hairdresser may be able to recommend henna or vegetable-based dyes that may be gentler on the hair and scalp than chemical hair treatments.

Look Good Feel Better is a national community service program run by the Cancer Patients Foundation, dedicated to teaching cancer patients how to manage the appearance-related side-effects caused by cancer treatment. Women, men and teens participate in practical workshop demonstrations covering skin care, make-up and head wear. Look Good Feel Better workshops are held regularly in metropolitan and some regional areas.

Call the Look Good Feel Better national office on 1800 650 960 for information or visit the website lgfb.org.au to register for a free workshop. The website also has practical tips in caring for your appearance.

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Where to get support and information*

*Not all states and territories have all services available

Cancer Council 13 11 20

Anyone affected by cancer can call Cancer Council 13 11 20 for more information. Health professionals can listen to your concerns, provide information, put you in touch with local services and send you free copies of our booklets and resources. You can also visit your local Cancer Council website:

Cancer Council websites

- **Cancer Council ACT** - actcancer.org
- **Cancer Council NSW** - cancercouncil.com.au
- **Cancer Council NT** - nt.cancer.org.au
- **Cancer Council QLD** - cancerqld.org.au
- **Cancer Council SA** - cancersa.org.au
- **Cancer Council TAS** - cancertas.org.au
- **Cancer Council VIC** - cancervic.org.au
- **Cancer Council WA** - cancerwa.asn.au

Cancer Council can also help you to connect with others for mutual support and to share information, through the following:

- **Face-to-face support groups** - often held in community centres or hospitals.
- **Telephone support groups** - facilitated by trained counsellors.
- **Peer support programs** - match you with someone who has had a similar cancer experience, for example the Cancer Connect one-on-one telephone peer support program.
- **Online forums** - such as onlinecommunity.cancercouncil.com.au.

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For information and support on cancer-related issues, call Cancer Council 13 11 20. This is a confidential service.

Acknowledgements

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Note to reader

Always consult your doctor about matters that affect your health. This fact sheet is intended as a general introduction and is not a substitute for professional medical, legal or financial advice. Information about cancer is constantly being updated and revised by the medical and research communities. While all care is taken to ensure accuracy at the time of publication, Cancer Council Australia and its members exclude all liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred by use of or reliance on the information provided in this fact sheet.



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