

Causes of hair loss in Women

FAQ

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What is the most common cause of hair loss in women?

Hair loss in women isn't always as straightforward as it is in most men. In men, about 90 percent of all cases are caused by hereditary male pattern baldness. However, for women, hair loss can be triggered by a multitude of conditions and circumstances.

Alopecia is the medical term for excessive or abnormal hair loss. There are different kinds of alopecia. What all hair loss has in common, whether it's in men or women, is that it is always a symptom of something else that's malfunctioning in the body. Hair will remain intact if hormone imbalance, disease, or some other condition is not occurring. That condition may be as simple as having a gene that makes you susceptible to male or female pattern baldness or one of the forms of alopecia areata, or it may be as complex as a whole host of diseases. Fortunately, hair loss may also be a symptom of a short-term event such as stress, pregnancy, and certain medications. In these situations, hair will grow back when the event has passed. Substances (including hormones), medications, and diseases, can cause a change in the hair growth and shedding phases and in their durations. When this happens, synchronous growth and shedding occur. Once the cause is dealt with, hairs go back to their random pattern of growth and shedding, and your hair loss problem stops.

What are the most common causes of female hair loss?

• Genes & Hormones

Common or "hereditary" baldness in women, also called female pattern alopecia, is genetic and can come either the mother's or father's side of the family. It is caused by the actions of two enzymes; aromatase (which is found predominantly in women) and 5-a reductase (which is found in both women and men).

The action of 5-a reductase is the main cause of androgenetic alopecia in men, as this enzyme converts the hormone testosterone to DHT. DHT is responsible for the miniaturization (shrinking) and gradual disappearance of affected hair follicles.

Women have half the amount of 5-a reductase compared to men, but have higher levels of the enzyme aromatase, especially at their frontal hairline. Aromatase is responsible for the formation of the female hormones estrone and estradiol. It also decreases the formation of DHT. Its presence in women may help to explain why the presentation of female hair loss is so different than in males, particularly with respect to the frontal hairline. It may also explain why women have a poor response to the drug finasteride (Propecia), a medication widely used to treat hair loss in men that works by blocking the formation of DHT.

• Medical Conditions

Women's hair seems to be particularly sensitive to underlying medical conditions. Medical conditions that produce a diffuse thinning or balding pattern include:

- Obstetric and gynecologic conditions such as post-partum and post-menopausal states or ovarian tumors
- Anemia— iron deficiency
- Thyroid disease
- Connective tissue diseases such as Lupus
- Nutritional— crash diets, bulimia, protein/calorie deficiency, essential fatty acid or zinc deficiency, malabsorption, hypervitaminosis A
- Stress — surgical procedures, general anesthesia, and severe emotional problems

(Continued)

- **Telogen Effluvium**

When your body goes through something traumatic like child birth, malnutrition, a severe infection, major surgery, or extreme stress, many of the 90 percent or so of the hair in the anagen (growing) phase or catagen (resting) phase can shift all at once into the shedding (telogen) phase. About 6 weeks to three months following the stressful event, telogen effluvium can begin. When in full-blown telogen effluvium, it is possible to lose handfuls of hair at a time. For most who suffer with TE, complete remission is probable as long as severely stressful events can be avoided. For some women however, telogen effluvium is a mysterious chronic disorder and can persist for months or even years without any true understanding of any triggering factors or stressors. In these cases, sometimes a full nutritional and hormonal evaluation through blood and urine testing can help elucidate the cause and direct a course of treatment.

- **Traction alopecia**

This condition is caused by localized trauma to the hair follicles from tight hairstyles that pull at hair over time. If the condition is detected early enough, the hair will regrow. Braiding, cornrows, tight ponytails, and extensions are the most common styling causes.

- **Birth Control**

Millions of women are prescribed the pill each year in this country, but very few are aware that oral contraceptives are a common trigger of hair loss for many who use them.

The "pill" suppresses ovulation by the combined actions of the hormones estrogen and progesterin or in some cases progesterin alone. Women who are predisposed to hormonal related hair loss or who are hypersensitive to the hormonal changes taking place in their bodies can experience hair loss to varying degrees while on the pill or more commonly, several weeks or months after stopping the pill.

What can I do to address current hair loss and prevent future hair loss?

While there are a couple of differences, the options for both men and women are very similar, and there are a few key points to understand. First, the sooner you start intervening to prevent further hair loss, the better. Medical therapies such as Propecia (for men) and topical Minoxidil (for women and men) work very well for the vast majority of people, but they must be used consistently for at least a year, and cannot be stopped. The biggest mistake people make when starting these therapies is getting frustrated with what they view as lack of results and discontinuing therapy. Additionally, LLLT (Low Level Laser Therapy) can be very effective at preventing further hair loss as well as thickening and strengthening the hair that already exists, leading to fuller looking hair with better coverage. Finally, the newest hair transplant techniques such as Reveal's RapidgraftSM can repopulate balding or even completely bald areas with your own hair, but not if the baldness has extended too far. If you feel that hair loss is an issue for you, it's important to start every possible intervention immediately to halt further hair loss before it's too late.