

Hair Loss

Effects of Cancer Treatment: Hair Loss

Hair loss is often the most noticeable side effect of cancer treatment. It can be very hard to deal with. Hair loss is also called alopecia (pronounced 'al-o-pee-sha').

Systemic therapy (also called chemo) is the treatment that will most often make you lose your hair, but it can also happen if you have radiation therapy.

Will I lose my hair?

The amount of hair that you lose depends on your cancer treatment. You may lose all of your hair, or your hair may become thin and patchy, or you may not lose any hair at all. Hair loss can happen on all parts of your body. It can happen slowly over time or all of a sudden.

Why am I losing my hair?

Some of the medicines used in systemic therapy do more than get rid of the cancer cells. They can also kill the healthy, fast-growing cells such as those found in your hair.

Radiation therapy only affects the hair in the area of your body that is being treated. How much hair you lose depends on the part of your body that is being treated and on the amount of radiation that you receive. Your scalp may start to feel sore or tender if you lose your hair because of the cancer treatment. If this happens, tell your health care team.

Will my hair grow back?

In most cases, your hair will grow back after your cancer treatment ends. If you have radiation therapy, your hair may not grow back – this depends on how much radiation you receive. You should talk to your radiation oncologist about whether or not your hair loss is permanent. There are no medicines that will make your hair grow back.

What are your questions? Please ask.

We are here to help you.

How can I cope with hair loss?

Prepare yourself for the feelings of sadness that you may feel if you lose your hair. Let your family, friends and the people you work with know that it may happen.

Talk with your doctor, nurse, or other members of your health care team about your feelings and concerns. Your health care team is there to help you. Feel free to ask questions or talk with them.

- Buy a wig before you lose your hair so that you can find one that matches your real hair colour.
- Get a short haircut before you start cancer treatment.
- Treat your hair and scalp gently.
- Use a mild shampoo. A hair conditioner will keep your hair from tangling.
- Do not use blow dryers or hair care products (such as spray, gel, dyes, or perms).
- Wear a hat in the sun to protect your scalp.
- Your health care team can help you to contact the Look Good Feel Better program.

Questions to ask your health care team

- Is my cancer treatment likely to make me lose my hair?
- How can I prepare myself for losing my hair?
- Will my hair grow back?
- When can I perm or dye my hair after treatment?

Looking for more information on this topic?

You can contact the Canadian Cancer Society at www.cancer.ca or call the Cancer Information Service of the Cancer Society at 1-888-939-3333. You can also contact your local public library for books, videos, magazine articles and online health information. For a list of public libraries in Nova Scotia go to <http://publiclibraries.ns.ca>.

For more information visit the Nova Scotia Cancer Care Program website www.nscancercare.ca.

Patient and family feedback is very important to us.

We would like to invite you to send any comments or suggestions on how to improve this booklet to education.cancercare@nshealth.ca or feel free to call us at 1-866-599-2267.

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This pamphlet is for educational purposes only.

It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider.

If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.