

Dealing with hair loss

It's a subject women don't like to talk about. When they do, they find they're in good company.

HAIR FACTS

- The average scalp contains 100,000 hairs.
- The average person loses 100 hairs a day.
- Both women and men tend to lose hair thickness and amount as they get older.
- Each individual hair survives about 4½ years and grows about ½ inch a month.
- A hair usually falls out in its fifth year and is replaced within six months.
- Genetic baldness is caused by the body's failure to produce new hairs.

— National Institutes of Health

BY KAREN SHIDELER
The Wichita Eagle

For BrendaJoe Straight, the hair loss that typically follows pregnancy and birth was anything but typical. Cheri Clark has been losing hair since childhood. Trudy Evans blames genetics: Her fine hair started thinning badly when she was about 35, just as her mother's and aunt's had. The three Wichitans are among millions of women who suffer — usually in silence — from hair loss.

A variety of causes

Alopecia is the medical term for hair loss, says dermatologist Stanley Capper. It takes a number of forms:

- Androgenetic alopecia, or pattern baldness. It's the most common type, and the type we associate with men and receding hairlines. In women, it shows up as thinning hair on the top of the head. It's what affects Evans, 54, and Straight, 45, who says she lost about half her hair after her last child was born.
- Alopecia aerata, in which hair loss occurs in small, round patches. It seems to be an autoimmune disease, in which the body attacks itself. It may be temporary, and medication may help the hair may grow back — or it may grow back on its own. Clark's alopecia aerata started when she was about 3.
- Alopecia totalis, or the total loss of hair on the scalp. It's what Clark, 48, has now.

- Alopecia universalis, when all the hair on the body, including eyelashes and pubic hair, disappears. It's rare.

- Traction alopecia. It's hair loss caused by chronic trauma to the hair, such as from braiding, ponytails or cornrows. It usually reverses when trauma stops.

- Scarring alopecia, often associated with lupus. The hair follicles are destroyed and replaced by scar tissue.

- Telogen effluvium. It's the shedding that follows pregnancy and birth; starting or stopping birth control pills can cause it, too. Hair typically starts growing back in three or four months.

- Ringworm, a fungal infection. It's rare in adults.

- Trichotillomania, caused by pulling or twirling the hair. It's more common in children, Capper says, and often is a way of dealing with stress. It may be a reaction to sexual abuse. In some cases, the pulling or twirling is a habit that can be broken; in many cases, resolving the issue requires therapy.

- Disease, poor nutrition, significant weight loss, emotional shock or physical shock, such as surgery, also can cause hair loss.

Options for treatment

Depending on the cause, topical minoxidil (Rogaine) may help. Women often are given the 2 percent version, because the 5 percent version given men may increase facial hair. Capper says the facial hair disappears when the drug is stopped.

Oral medication is approved for men but not for women. Occasionally, women will get hair transplants. Straight used Rogaine for a while

but says it never really worked. Clark used it and got monthly cortisone shots, in her scalp at first and later in her hip. But the drugs caused high blood pressure and other side effects.

Most women eventually opt for some kind of concealment, as Clark, Straight and Evans did. Hairpieces and full wigs are available in a range of prices, from \$100 on up into the thousands of dollars, with cost depending on factors such as length and whether it's synthetic or real. Hairpieces and wigs require occasional styling and coloring; Clark, Straight and Evans wash theirs about once a week and say they're easy to care for.

Straight and Evans have hairpieces that cover the thinning area of their scalp and blend into their own hair. Clark got a full wig. They say it was the smartest move they ever made.

It's OK for men to be balding or to shave their heads, they point out, but society has a double standard:

"Any woman, no matter what, her hair is expected to look good," Evans says.

Women tend not to talk about hair loss except in anonymous settings such as the online forum www.her-alopecia.com. The three Wichitans, who hadn't met before agreeing to discuss theirs, said only family and close friends have known about their hair.

LeeAnn Callahan, who helped the three and provides fitting and styling services through her business, The Wig Lady, says she works by appointment to protect the confidentiality of her clients. Whether they're 3 or 100, she says, they have one thing in common: "Everybody's devastated."

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"I THINK IT'S THE BEST THING THAT'S EVER HAPPENED."

BrendaJoe Straight says of the hairpiece she got a couple of weeks ago.



"I SPEND 10 MINUTES ON MY HAIR EVERY DAY, AND IT DOESN'T COST A FORTUNE."

Trudy Evans says of her hairpiece.



The medications Cheri Clark was taking for hair loss caused other medical problems. Her husband told her,

"I DON'T CARE WHETHER YOU HAVE HAIR OR NOT, I JUST WANT YOU AROUND LONG-TERM."

Jaime Oppenheimer/
The Wichita Eagle