

Alopecia Areata

Alopecia areata is a condition that causes patchy hair loss. The hair falls out and usually leaves round patches of skin showing. This can occur on the scalp and other parts of the body, and may last for many years. The hair can grow back, but it often falls out again. Many people with alopecia areata have only a few bare patches, while others lose more hair. Alopecia areata can affect people of any age, and often starts in childhood. Some people have other family members with the same condition.

Treatment

There is no cure for alopecia areata. Certain treatments may help hair to regrow more quickly, although nothing can prevent new patches from developing.

The most common treatments for alopecia areata include:

- Corticosteroid injections or cream applied to the areas of hair loss. These drugs can help with inflammation and may have a positive effect on the immune system.
- Hair regrowth medications that are applied to the skin such as minoxidil 5%.
- Medications that affect the immune system such as anthralin, sulphasalazine.
- Ultraviolet light therapy.

How is alopecia areata diagnosed?

Alopecia areata can often be diagnosed because of the characteristic pattern of patchy hair loss. Your dermatologist may also take a sample of hair, which can be examined under a microscope. They may also perform a blood test to look for signs of an autoimmune disease.

What does alopecia areata look like?

If you have alopecia areata you may notice that you are losing hair in patches. Sometimes the hair seems to fall out quite quickly. You may have one or more bare patches of skin where hair used to grow – these are often small patches to begin with, about 2–3 centimetres in diameter. You may notice clumps of hair on your pillow if the hair loss occurs on your scalp. The scalp is the most common place for hair loss, however, hair loss can also involve any part of the body where hair grows, including beards, eyebrows, eyelashes, arms and legs. The patches of hair loss vary in size. Occasionally the condition can lead to extensive hair loss on the head and other parts of the body.

Sometimes the hair starts to regrow on its own, although it may fall out again. It is not possible to predict whether your hair will fall out or grow back – the condition is different from person to person. Even people who have lost all of their hair can regain their hair, although when hair loss is widespread there is a greater chance that it may not grow back. When hair regrows it may appear white or be very fine to start with, but your own hair texture and colour tends to return later on.

Alopecia areata can also cause nail problems. The fingernails and toenails may develop white spots or lines, or have tiny dents (called pitting) or splits. Nails may become dull and thin. Nail changes may be one of the early signs of the condition.

What causes alopecia areata?

Alopecia areata is an autoimmune disease, which means that your body's own immune system mistakenly attacks itself. Normally the immune system protects the body against infection and disease. In the case of alopecia areata, your body's immune system attacks your hair follicles. There is no one cause of alopecia areata. Like other autoimmune diseases, it is thought to result from a combination of factors such as your genes, the environment and other trigger factors.

People with alopecia areata have a higher risk of developing other conditions such as vitiligo (a skin condition where patches of lighter skin develop), thyroid disease, asthma and allergies. It may also be more common in people who have a family member with an autoimmune disease.

What else can I do about alopecia areata?

It can be very upsetting to experience hair loss. It may be helpful to learn as much as you can about the disease and talk to other people who have alopecia to see how they have been coping. Remember that alopecia areata does not affect your overall health.

The Australia Alopecia Areata Foundation is a good place to find out more, and also has links to support groups around Australia.

Go to <http://www.aaaf.org.au> for more information.