

# Hair loss during cancer treatment



Some chemotherapy and radiation therapy can cause the loss of head hair (alopecia) and body hair. This information sheet will explain how to take care of your hair during and after your treatment.

## Why might head hair and body hair fall out?

### Chemotherapy

Chemo kills rapidly growing cells, such as cancer cells. But it may also affect other cells in the body that are dividing rapidly. That's why the hair on your head and body could fall out. This is not dangerous.

### Radiation therapy

The rays are directed at the cancer mass in order to destroy it. These rays may cause head and body hair on the part of the body they cross to fall out. For example, if the cancer is in the brain, the part of the head that receives the rays will lose its hair.

In the same way, if the cancer is in the leg, the skin the rays cross over will lose its body hair.

The loss of head hair and body hair after radiation therapy may be temporary or permanent, but it's not dangerous. Ask your radiation oncologist for more information.



## Will I lose all the hair on my head and body?

That depends on the type of treatment you have. It's possible that not all your hair will fall out. You may find that it's just thinner and more fragile while you're having chemo. Or hair loss may be very local during radiation therapy treatment.

The loss of body hair and eyelashes can also vary according to the type of treatment.

**But it's much less frequent in any case.**

To learn more about this, talk to your attending physician (oncologist or radiation oncologist) or to the oncology pharmacist.



If you lose your hair, that doesn't mean your treatment is "stronger" or more "aggressive." And if you don't lose your hair, that doesn't mean your treatment is "gentler."

## When can I expect to lose my head hair or body hair?

That depends on the type of chemo or the dose of radiation you receive. You may start to lose your hair 2 to 3 weeks after you start treatment. But it varies. For example, if you have a short course of radiation therapy (a few days), you may lose your hair once the treatment is finished.

## Does it hurt to lose hair?



No, but your skull may feel more sensitive than usual. You may have a tingling sensation or feel like scratching your head when your hair is falling out.

## Can I prevent my head or body hair from falling out?

No. At the moment, there is no method that has been proven effective for avoiding hair loss.

## How can I prepare for losing my hair?

Everyone reacts in a different way. It all depends on your situation, your values and your feelings.

- > Some people cut their hair short before it begins to fall out. This gives the hair more volume so it looks thicker. And when hair does begin to fall out, it may be less obvious if your hair is already short.
- > You may decide to wear a hair prosthesis – a wig – or a scarf, hat, cap or turban to hide your hair loss.
- > Some people decide to shave their heads before starting treatment.



Talk to your family and your care team. They can help you make the decision that's right for you.

Losing your head hair and pubic hair can change your self-image. You may feel less feminine and less comfortable in your relationships when it comes to love and sex. If you feel the need, see a psychologist or a sexologist.

## If I do decide to wear a wig, when should I buy one?

It's better to choose your wig before you start to lose your hair, especially if you want to find a style and colour like your natural hair.

## Are wigs covered by my insurance?

It depends on the company. Ask your agent. If necessary, your doctor can give you a prescription.

## Will my head hair and body hair grow back?

Yes, most of the time.

- > With **chemo**, hair generally begins to grow back 4 to 6 weeks after the end of treatment. It may start sooner.
- > With **radiation therapy**, hair begins to grow back 3 to 6 months after the end of treatment. It is possible that hair will not grow back in the area where you had radiation. Talk to your radiation oncologist.

Hair that grows back after treatment often has a different texture and colour. Many people find it takes a little over a year for their hair to look the way it did before.

If your pubic hair grows back during treatment, don't shave. This will also reduce the risk of having ingrown hair under the skin, which can be painful.

### How should I take care of my scalp during my treatment?

If you have just a little or no hair left, you need to protect the skin on your scalp. When you go outside, wear a scarf or hat or apply sunscreen. Also wear sunglasses to protect your eyes.



### How should I take care of my hair during and after my treatment?

As long as you're in treatment and for 3 months afterwards, you need to protect your hair. Here are a few tips:

- Brush your hair gently with a brush that has flexible bristles.
- Use a moisturizing shampoo and conditioner (better yet, products with a pH of 4.5 to 5.5). Ask your hairdresser for suggestions.
- Don't wash your hair as often as you did before.
- Don't braid your hair tightly.
- Don't dye your hair or get a permanent. Chemicals can affect your hair.

- Dry your hair by blotting gently with a towel – don't rub hard.
- Air dry your hair or set the dryer on low.
- Don't use a curling iron, flat iron or heated rollers.
- Sleep on a satin pillowcase. Wear a cotton cap at night



### What should I do if I lose my nose hair or eyelashes?

It can happen. You may also find that your skin, inside your nostrils, and your eyes feel dry. Here are some tips on how to feel more comfortable:

- > Use a water-based nasal gel. You can buy it at the drugstore, over the counter. It will stop your nose from running or bleeding.
- > Buy artificial tears and use them at least 4 times a day. That will make your eyes feel less sensitive.

### What should I do if I have trouble accepting my hair loss?

Losing your head hair, eyelashes and body hair may be one of the most difficult things about living with cancer. It changes your body image, reminding you that you're sick.



## Where should I go for help or answers to my questions?

If you have questions, feel free to ask a member of your care team.



### NOTEPAD



#### Questions




#### Resource people and contacts




### USEFUL RESOURCES

Virage Foundation: You can rent wigs and get free hats and scarves from the Foundation. They also offer a list of wig sellers.

> **514 890-8000**,  
extension 28139  
> **viragecancer.org**  
(in French)



Look Good Feel Better  
Workshops for women with cancer:  
skin care, makeup (how to draw your  
eyebrows), head coverings.

> **1 800 914-5665**  
> **lgfb.ca**

If you're looking for a wig, you could also ask your hairdresser.

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available (in French only). Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our web site  
**chumontreal.qc.ca/votresante**

*The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.*

To find out more about the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal  
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