



Hair Loss

Reverse Your Losses

Here's everything you need to know to keep your mane from going down the drain

By: Jenna Bergen

This isn't a story about losing your hair gracefully.

Instead, it's about men like Chuck, a successful lawyer, who in his early twenties looked in the mirror and was mortified to see the hair on his temples thinning. He could do the math, especially after thumbing through the family photo album and using his father and uncles as gauges. If he was losing his hair this young, he figured, he'd probably be bald by his thirties, a time that should be the pinnacle of a man's earning power and social prowess.

The images in the mental gallery that followed weren't pretty, starting with the one of him wearing a toupee. "I realized a hairpiece would never work with my active lifestyle," he says. Transplant technology was improving, he read, but the idea of having his follicles rearranged in a \$20,000 surgical shell game filled him with dread. So when he read that some researchers thought a blood-pressure pill called minoxidil (now marketed as Rogaine) had hair-sprouting potential, he had a pharmacist grind the pills into a solution and then shot it onto his scalp with a syringe. Later, he heard about a prostate drug called finasteride that blocks a hormone implicated in genetic hair loss, so he convinced his doctor to give him a prescription for that, too. He continued using the treatments in tandem.

Fifteen years later, both drugs are FDA-approved treatments for androgenetic alopecia, or male-pattern baldness (MPB). As for Chuck, "I don't have an entirely full head of hair," he says. "But I'm not bald like I'm supposed to be, either."

Assuming you've started to lose your hair, saving it like Chuck did will take time, money, commitment, and perhaps even a willingness to use a prescription drug for a purpose other than its intended use (under a doctor's supervision, of course). It may require employing techniques that aren't yet completely proved--shooting a laser beam at your scalp, for example. Because by the time they are proved beyond a reasonable doubt, you might already be bald. And that's too late.

Start taking finasteride

Finasteride (marketed as Propecia and other brands) is the first drug proved to inhibit the formation of dihydrotestosterone (DHT), a hormone that shrinks hair follicles. This little pill slows--and even reverses, in some cases--the progressive miniaturization of hair follicles that ultimately leads to a bald head. You'll need to take it once a day for the rest of your life.

Finasteride seems to not only slow hair loss but also prompt "cosmetically significant" new growth in some patients, says Nelson Lee Novick, M.D., a clinical professor of dermatology at Mount Sinai school of medicine in New York City. Try a one-two punch: "For men in the earliest stages of hair loss, I find that combining these therapies retards hair loss 95 percent of the time and grows new hair at least 50 percent of the time."

Save money. A month's supply of Propecia costs about \$60, and it won't be covered by insurance. But if you ask your doctor for the prostate drug Proscar instead, you'll pay a quarter of the price. Each Proscar pill contains 5 milligrams (mg) of finasteride. (Propecia has 1 mg.) Use a splitter to divide the pill into four pieces. Take a quarter of a pill each day, says Gabe Mirkin, M.D., a dermatologist and medical director of Mirkin Medical Consultants in Kensington, Maryland.

Amp it up. If you're not seeing results with Propecia, you may benefit from another DHT blocker, one that targets the hormone in hair follicles more selectively. Prescribed for prostate enlargement, dutasteride (marketed as Avodart) comes in a 0.5 mg pill. Several years ago, manufacturer GlaxoSmithKline conducted Phase II clinical trials on this drug as a hair-loss remedy. Participants given a 2.5 mg daily dose of dutasteride grew two to three times more new hair than those given 5 mg a day of finasteride. (Those doses were five times the amount of dutasteride and finasteride in Avodart and Propecia, respectively.)

"After Propecia, typically, I would start a patient with 0.5 mg Avodart, and track the results and monitor for side effects for a few months," says Alan Bauman, M.D., medical director of Bauman Medical Group, a hair-restoration practice in Boca Raton, Florida, adding that off-label treatments must be accompanied by a discussion of risks and benefits. "Sometimes, we'll then move to a 2.5 mg dose. It seems to work a little faster and a little better." While the 0.5 mg dose suppressed scalp DHT levels by 60 percent in clinical trials, the 2.5 mg dose dropped them 82 percent.

Start taking minoxidil

Minoxidil is the only topical preparation approved by the FDA for male-pattern hair loss. Researchers aren't sure how it works, although some theorize that it dilates blood vessels in the scalp. Applied twice a day, the solution makes hair grow longer and thicker, even stimulating new growth in a lucky few.

Minoxidil comes in two formulations, 2 percent and 5 percent. "I don't see any value in opting for the 2 percent strength," says Dr. Novick. "If you're going to go for it, use the 5 percent. The worst that can happen is it doesn't work." As with finasteride, you're looking at a lifetime commitment. Stop treatments, and any hair you've regrown is headed back

down the drain.

Save money. Most of the dermatologists and hair-replacement surgeons we interviewed saw no downside to using generic minoxidil, which is about 30 percent less expensive than Pfizer's Rogaine.

Amp it up. Dr. Novick has some patients add Retin-A, which contains tretinoin, the acid form of vitamin A. "Retin-A also seems to work in combination with minoxidil," he says, perhaps for the same reason: It dilates blood vessels. What's more, it may help make the top layers of skin more permeable, which aids in the absorption of minoxidil, says Dr. Novick.

Start using lasers

A personal laser beam that grows hair might sound like a Ron Popeil invention. Yet the FDA has confirmed that the handheld HairMax Lasercomb (\$550), which administers low-level laser therapy [LLLT], actually works. (It should be noted, however, that the FDA approval process is less stringent with devices than with drugs.) The Lasercomb seems to energize the mitochondria, or "power plants," in cells. In turn, this may switch hair follicles from their resting phase to their growing phase. Log three 10- to 15-minute sessions each week and you should see results in 3 to 4 months.

Save bucks. The HairMax Lasercomb also comes in a \$400 travel version.

Amp it up. For a stronger effect, try the laser apparatus offered at some hair-loss practices. "These [LLLT] machines convert 70 percent of hair follicles from the resting phase to the growing phase," says Robert Leonard, D.O., founder and chief surgeon of Leonard Hair Transplant Associates in Rhode Island. Dr. Leonard recommends a year of sessions, starting with twice a week and eventually scaling back to once a month. (Expect to pay \$1,750 to \$3,500 for the full year.) Patients typically see diminished shedding after the third month. At the end of the year, you're done--unless you begin to notice more shedding. "Those individuals can either use the handheld device or come in on a maintenance schedule--usually every 1 to 3 months," says Dr. Leonard.

Avoid seeking laser treatments in haircutting salons. For the best results, find an establishment owned and operated by a physician specializing in hair loss.

Fix these four hidden causes of shedding:

1. Sudden hair loss

The trigger is emotional or physical trauma. The shock can cause telogen effluvium, a condition that makes hair stop growing and fall out. "Imagine going bald overnight," says Jessie Cheung, M.D., an assistant professor of dermatology at New York University school of medicine. As your mind and body recover, so too will your hairline.

2. Steady hair loss

Hair follicles demand a steady infusion of nutrients to sustain rapid growth. If you're shedding more than usual for 2 or 3 months straight, look at your diet: Too little iron, biotin, or zinc can send hair into starvation mode. To restore those nutrients, eat more broccoli, spinach, and eggs. Also, pop a daily multivitamin, such as Centrum.

3. A round, smooth patch

A silver-dollar-size bare spot signals alopecia areata. The catalyst is still unknown, but stress and genetics are likely culprits, says Kevin McElwee, Ph.D., an assistant professor of dermatology at the University of British Columbia. See a dermatologist for corticosteroid injections to ease the inflammation causing your hair to hibernate.

4. A round, scaly patch

You probably have tinea capitis, a fungal infection. (Think athlete's foot of the head.) Your body battles back with a wave of white blood cells that harm hair follicles. Try an over-the-counter antifungal shampoo, such as Nizoral. If that doesn't work, ask for a prescription antifungal medication, such as Lamisil.-Wanda Lau

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