

Hair Hopes and Happenings

Before, During, and After Treatment

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Keep moving forward with knowledge and confidence

Hair Loss

Part one of a three-part series

This is the first of a three-part series designed to provide you with practical information about your hair, including tips and tricks to help you navigate changes before, during and after treatment.

Hair loss is an unwelcome event. I encourage you to acknowledge your feelings, whatever they are, with the goal of learning some solutions so you can keep moving forward with knowledge and confidence.

These are ten of the most frequently asked questions about the first phase of hair loss:

When will I lose my hair?

Your oncology team can provide you with detailed information regarding the treatment plan and its potential impact on your hair. Today, many treatment protocols allow them to reasonably predict whether and when you might experience hair loss. Remember your medical team is here to support you, so don't hesitate to request the necessary information from them about any impact treatment may have on you. This will help you plan ahead to maintain your appearance and well-being throughout your treatment journey.

Should I cut my hair short?

Many women choose to experiment with shorter hairstyles before undergoing significant hair loss or opting to shave their heads. This decision serves a dual purpose: firstly, shorter hair can alleviate scalp pressure, particularly during the shedding phase when the scalp may become sensitive, as it places less weight on the crown of the head.

Secondly, managing shorter hair can be more convenient than dealing with the shedding of long hair. Once you receive information from your oncology team regarding the anticipated timing of hair loss, you can make an informed choice about whether to trim your hair in preparation for the shedding process.

When should I shave my head?

It's been my experience that for most women, the point at which managing hair loss becomes more stressful than the thought of going without it is when they consider shaving their heads. Many even find a sense of relief and freedom once it is done. On the other hand, there are those who prefer to be proactive and shave their heads right away. That said, you should confirm that your treatment protocol will indeed lead to hair loss before taking this step. Regardless of the timing, it's important to understand that hair loss due to treatment, even though it may not feel that way, is typically temporary.

A word of caution about shaving: Despite all of the images featuring women with perfectly shaved heads, it's advised to avoid shaving down to the scalp. Leave about a quarter of an inch of hair all over your head. Shaving too close can risk cuts, which in turn increases the risk of infection and can lead to ingrown hairs, especially for those planning to wear wigs or hats. To stay safe, keep it relatively short but not to the bare scalp.

To wig or not to wig?

Wigs can provide a sense of privacy and help you maintain a consistent appearance during your treatment. I recommend exploring wig options before the need arises, even if you're uncertain about wearing one. This initial shopping experience is cost-free and allows you to discover the range of choices available. Many individuals find comfort in having a wig selected just in case they decide to use it. It's important





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to remember that purchasing a wig doesn't commit you to wearing it all the time. However, having one ready in advance can offer peace of mind for special occasions like weddings or graduations, where you may prefer not to be photographed in a scarf or hat.

What will my insurance cover?

Most wig stores typically won't handle insurance claims on your behalf. You will need to pay for the wig upfront and then submit a reimbursement claim. For this reason, I recommend contacting your insurance provider before shopping for a wig to understand what is covered. Insurance companies classify wigs as "cranial prosthetics," so when discussing coverage, you need to use this same terminology. Keep in mind that this doesn't mean there are specialized cranial prosthetic stores; the product is essentially a wig in all aspects except when interacting with your insurance provider.

If your claim is initially denied, consider resubmitting it. Alternatively, you can explore the option of deducting the cranial prosthetic as a medical expense on your taxes. Consult with your tax preparer and be sure to retain your receipts for this purpose.

Where do I start wig shopping?

Before you start shopping for wigs, it's a good idea to seek recommendations. There are numerous wig forums on social media dedicated to women with conditions like cancer or alopecia, which is an autoimmune disorder causing hair loss. Once you've identified a store, it's advisable to give them a call and inquire about their experience in assisting individuals with medical hair loss. Some stores primarily cater to fashion wigs, and their products and policies will be focused on their target audience. Be sure to ask about the size of their inventory and their policies regarding trying on wigs. Keep in mind that some stores might have limited options and less flexible try-on policies, including charging a fee after trying on a certain number of wigs. Having a conversation with the store staff beforehand can provide valuable insights and help you determine if they're the right fit for your wig shopping needs.

What are my options if I don't wear a wig?

If a wig is not in your plans, you have lots of options for comfort and coverage. Hats are an increasingly popular choice and can provide coverage and protection with style and charm. You may opt to wear a hat and scarf combination to give you full head coverage, depending on the style of hat. Scarfs by themselves can make a great head cover, offering your look lots of color. There are also hat-scarf combos that have ruching on the sides made of ultra-soft cotton or bamboo. A quick look online will bring up many options; alternatively, you can often find these in a wig retailer near you.

A note about color: many women like to wear black, and while it goes with most everything, when factoring in fatigue and changes to your skin, you may not always wish to wear makeup. Finding a head covering that is flattering to your skin without makeup might help you to feel better, and all black may not be that best option. These items are relatively inexpensive so you can have fun with trying options.

What if I do cold caps but I still lose my hair?

Cold caps are specifically designed to help you preserve your hair during the course of your treatment. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using cold caps with your medical team. While the primary objective is to retain as much of your hair as possible throughout the treatment, it's worth noting that some women have reported experiencing hair loss despite using cold caps. In the event that you encounter such hair loss, my suggestion is to complete your treatment and evaluate the remaining hair before making any decisions about cutting or shaving it off.

Even if you experience significant hair loss with cold caps, it is generally advisable to complete your treatment before making any further decisions. Afterward, you can strategize regarding the amount of hair you still have. For instance, you might find that a partial wig or wig topper suffices if the hair loss is concentrated in a specific area, and this can be worn until your natural hair regrows. The remaining hair can also be artfully used as bangs or around the ears, either under hats or scarves to create the illusion of a full head of hair, or it can be incorporated into a full wig for certain occasions.

Ultimately, it's better to assess the situation and work with what you have before considering any drastic cuts, as this will leave you with more options and flexibility in managing your hair during and after treatment.

What can I do to look more like myself during treatment?

Hair loss can also include your brows and lashes, but not always at the same time as the hair on your head. The use of makeup can enhance the look of brows and give you the illusion of lashes. Wearing artificial lashes are not recommended during treatment; however with some eyeliner and a little shadow, you can bring balance to your appearance until your own lashes and brows return. The regrowth cycle for brows and lashes is approximately 60-90 days. A well-chosen pair of glasses



and lip stick can really help detract from thinning brows and lashes, and as a bonus, the glasses can help keep dust and debris out of your eyes and the lipstick will help with moisture.

When will my hair grow back?

Hair growth is influenced by a variety of factors, such as age, diet, seasonal changes, and genetic predisposition. Typically, hair regrows at a rate of about half an inch per month, equating to approximately six inches per year. Many women choose to forgo wearing wigs once they achieve sufficient scalp coverage. It's worth noting that hair grows at different rates due to three distinct phases: the growth phase, the resting phase, and the shedding phase. Therefore, it's advisable to continue trimming your hair until it reaches a desirable level of thickness before attempting to regain length. 

The next article of this series will address hairlessness and all the considerations that go with this sensitive time and appearance. Look for it in our next issue!

Special Contributor's Bio:

Jeanna Doyle Ruhl is a licensed cosmetologist and trained Medical Aesthetic Provider, with extensive training and certifications in the field of Oncology Skin Care and corrective makeup. Her publication, WigED, is the first beauty book for women seeking guidance on wig selection. Jeanna is the founder of Ruhl Beauty, a business dedicated to empowering women affected by appearance-altering illness or injury. Jeanna's latest passion is her newfound role as the project manager for the Ricardo Fisas Natura Bissé Foundation where her focus is on launching their pioneering Oncology Skin Care Education program for survivors, caregivers and professionals in the United States.