CHEMOTHERAPY AND YOUR HAIR

Chemotherapy is a medical term for a course of treatment over a number of sessions and is normally a combination of medication given to patients by injection, prescribed by an Oncologist as part of a treatment programme for cancer.

While undertaking this course of treatment, changes take place within the body as the treatment is fighting the illness. The consequence of this for many patients is the temporary loss of total body hair including hair on the head, eye brows and lashes.

When the hair starts to fall out, this is usually after the second session of treatment, but this can vary from patient to patient. This hair loss is normally of a diffuse type, reducing density over the scalp rather than in the appearance of bald patches. The reason for the diffuse shedding is that the hairs are all triggered into a resting state at the same time, referred to as the Telogen phase.

It is important to remember that, once the hair starts to shed, it will not be affected by handling, brushing, combing or shampooing although some patients think that, if they do not handle their hair, it will not fall out. This is not the case. This diffuse hair loss is, for some, the most upsetting side effect of the treatment and some patients struggle with continuing with the treatment because of this.

Patients are offered an opportunity to wear an ice cap during chemotherapy sessions to try to prevent hair loss by keeping the hair follicles in the growing stage, referred to as the anogen phase. This cap is ice cold and some may find it uncomfortable. Patients have mixed views as to the success of this ice cap, but it would be worth discussing this with the medical staff.

During the period of shedding it is best to keep the scalp clean by shampooing as normal, as hair may become entangled as it falls away from the hair follicles. Shampooing does not increase the hair loss but makes the scalp feel more comfortable and, when the hair starts to regrow, the scalp is also then in the optimum condition. The other reason that the hair or scalp should be shampooed regularly is that, if you decide to wear a turban or a wig, then the scalp has a covering of sebum (sweat) and this can leave the surface sore along with causing an odour. All such head wear must be washed regularly.

When the course of treatment is completed, the hair will start to grow back. It is at this point that the hair appears fine, fluffy in texture and white in colour (translucent). This type of hair is referred to as vellus but very soon this should return to its natural shade and texture and this is referred to as terminal hair. This hair growth should revert to it's pre-treatment condition and some patients have reported that they feel that their hair is improved compared to its state before their treatment started. Once the hair is in the terminal stage it will take 12 months for the hair to reach the length of 6 inches, as hair grows at ½ inch per month

Before or during chemotherapy, the hospital may advise you to consider wearing a wig. The staff at the hospital may be able to arrange for you to see a wig supplier before you start to lose your hair. It is best to consider this as early as possible, as you need time in choosing the right colour and style. When you are looking for a stock (of the shelf) wig there is no difference between the quality of wigs supplied by the NHS provider or those purchased

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privately. In most cases, any difference in cost is reflected not in the quality of the wig but in the aftercare provided, such as alterations, cutting and styling. Some patients may wish to have a bespoke (made to measure) wig. This is not usually covered under the terms of the NHS for chemotherapy treatment and will necessarily involve delay, which could mean that it is not available until after you have completed your course of treatment.

When choosing from wig catalogues, it is important to remember that the photographs are of models wearing the wigs, which have been cut and styled to suit them. When you collect your chosen wig it is unlikely that you could wear it straightaway. It will, at first sight, have too much volume and length. It will require styling and cutting. If the supplier is able to do this, or you are able to take his to your own hairdresser, then take with you a pre-treatment photograph to show you like your hair styled and a friend for support. When choosing the colour of our wig, note that wigs look more natural if they are one shade lighter than your own hair colour, as your skin tone does change whilst undergoing any intensive medical treatment.

It is important to stress that the wearing of a wig – and also turbans, hats and headscarves – does not cause further hair loss or prevent regrowth.

A number of patients from the onset of their treatment decide not to wear any form of head wear and this is a personal choice. You must remember however that hair is an insulator and scalp hair protects against the environment and climate such has heat changes and especially exposure to UV rays. You will therefore need use a high Sun Protection Factor cream.

If you are concerned about any of the issues raised above regarding hair loss during chemotherapy treatment, then you should seek a consultation with a registered Trichologist.

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