

GREY HAIR (CANITIES)

BBC Radio Bristol on air question: Why do some people go grey?

The phrase 'grey hair' is not a correct term. Hair appears grey when some of a person's hair starts to lose its pigmentation and become translucent. When these translucent hairs blend in with the coloured hairs, then this produces the greying effect. The degree of greyness depends on the base hair colour and the proportion of hairs which have become translucent. So, if you have dark brown hair with a mixture of translucent hairs, this is referred to as 'iron grey', whereas if you have light brown hair this produces an appearance, referred to as 'salt and pepper'.

The loss of colour in the hair is an inherited genetic trait and can affect anyone at any age. The reason the hair loses its colour is that melanocytes (which form the colour pigment) stop producing pigment granules. The hair then grows without pigment.

This change does not happen at the same time for all follicles so a person cannot literally "go grey overnight" What can happen however in some people is that a proportion of the pigmented hairs are shed more quickly than usual, possibly after severe shock or trauma, so leaving all the translucent hairs with a reduced number of pigmented hairs. While new hairs will form in the follicles to replace the shed hairs, these will be unpigmented, therefore increasing the appearance of 'greyness'.

When a person no longer has any pigmented hairs, although the remaining hairs are translucent, this gives the appearance of whiteness.

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