

Trichotillomania

Trichotillomania is a habitual twisting, plucking or pulling out of individual hairs or clumps of hair. This is a self-inflicted condition and can, if left to continue over a prolonged period, lead to permanent hair loss.

If you know more about Trichotillomania and what it looks like, it may be your quick and prompt intervention could stop the destruction of a friend's hair follicles.

The condition is debilitating and isolating not only for the sufferer but also for family and friends. For you to be able to give support and information can, in some cases, reduce the stress that may itself be the cause and/or an aggravating feature of the problem.

The condition Trichotillomania can start as young as 2 years of age, normally with the twisting of the hair around the fingers or thumb. It is thought that this twisting is done in place of thumb sucking. If this is noted, this should be stopped as soon as possible before it becomes habit forming. There are two options to consider. The first is to put mittens on the child's hands at bed time or secondly to cut their hair short, which may seem a drastic measure. This however is the simplest treatment and the hair follicles will be allowed to reform new healthy hairs. Whilst it is not always easy to convince the parent or guardian that this is necessary, it must be emphasized strongly, that if this condition is allowed to persist, then permanent damage will result, leading to very fine and poor-quality hair or, at worst, permanent hair loss.

Trichotillomania can occur throughout life at times of stress: it is not uncommon that the school environment may be very stressful for children of any age. I have however seen a number of people of all ages and all professions, who feel that pulling their eye brows, eye lashes and hair out from the head or face temporarily takes away the pain of feeling lonely and isolated, and with low self-esteem.

During this time of unprecedented and overwhelming stress due to lockdown, financial impacts, isolation for some and enforced time with family for others, as well as worry about the health of family and friends, people of any age may be susceptible.

Signs to look out for include areas of thinning which can change in shape but not necessarily in size. Such areas of sparse hair are more likely to be found at easily accessible sites such as side or temples. It may also show in the plucking of eye brows or eye lashes. Hair pulling is usually carried out unconsciously, often at times of rest, whilst reading or watching television but can happen during

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any activity which leaves the hands free to move over the scalp. On examination, the area of thinning will reveal hairs which appear as twisted and broken and, in some severe cases, the scalp may be clearly visible.

I have hopefully given you an insight into why a person may feel the need to disfigure their appearance by pulling out hair. If you are worried about someone who has increased hair loss, which appears to be due to pulling or over-handling, then the best help would be to encourage them to contact a registered Trichologist, who will be able to advise on strategies to reduce the compulsive activity and to improve the appearance of the hair and scalp.

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