



Breast cancer and hair loss



Breast Cancer Care is the UK's leading provider of information, practical assistance and emotional support for anyone affected by breast cancer. Every year we reach over 750,000 people with breast cancer or breast health concerns. All our services are free.

For more information call the Breast Cancer Care helpline free on 0808 800 6000 (textphone 0808 800 6001) or visit www.breastcancercare.org.uk.

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Introduction

Many people will find that they have to cope with losing their hair as a result of treatment for breast cancer. For some, this is the most distressing side effect of treatment. Your hair may be very much part of your self-image and losing it may affect your confidence and self-esteem. Being prepared for this possibility may make it easier to cope with.

This booklet explains how you may lose your hair and the effect it may have on you. It also looks at caring for your hair and scalp during and after treatment and discusses wigs and other kinds of headwear. At the end of the booklet there is a list of useful organisations and wig, headwear and accessory suppliers. You will also find a pull-out giving ideas for wearing scarves and different ways of tying them.

Although this booklet is aimed mainly at women, men who have lost their hair while being treated for breast cancer may find some of the information relevant and helpful.

Coping with losing your hair

For most of us, the way we feel about ourselves is closely linked to the way we look and losing your hair can be devastating. You may feel angry that this has happened on top of everything else, or you may feel unattractive and unfeminine. It may also make you feel vulnerable and exposed, particularly as it is such a visible side effect and a constant reminder of your cancer. Such reactions are completely understandable and you may find it takes some time to adjust to the loss.

In some cultures hair has a particular significance. For example, long hair may be seen as a symbol of fertility and desirability or a sign of health and status, while other cultures believe that the hair is a means of getting rid of impurities from the body. If



'I was devastated – I had long, thick dark hair that I had been growing for years. Just before the treatment started I had it cut shorter, but not very short because I wouldn't have felt comfortable with that.' **RONA**

'I know it may sound strange, but losing my hair was worse than the mastectomy.' **OLLWYNNE**

'In a peculiar way I felt strangely liberated. Wash and go took on a whole new meaning!' **JILL**

'Before my hair fell out my seven year old asked me not to meet her at school until it had grown back. When it actually happened she was fine about it and started wearing bandanas herself so that I didn't feel on my own.' **RONA**

hair has a special cultural significance for you, losing it may affect your cultural identity as well as your body image or self-esteem, making it even more difficult to come to terms with.

If there is any likelihood of you losing your hair your chemotherapy or breast care nurse will talk to you about what may happen before treatment starts. As well as talking about practical issues such as caring for your scalp or wearing a wig, you can also discuss your feelings about losing your hair and look at ways to help you cope with this.

Each woman will find her own way of dealing with losing her hair, but you may find it helps to talk to others who have been through the same experience. You can ring the helpline at Breast Cancer Care and ask to be put in touch with a volunteer who has experienced hair loss and understands some of the difficulties you may be facing. Or you may meet other people having treatment at the hospital or at a breast cancer support group.

'I found talking to other people who had experienced hair loss and who could offer specific advice and suggestions for overcoming what may seem trivial problems was invaluable. A little support and reassurance can work wonders.'

OLWYNNE

Other people's reactions

People will respond to you losing your hair in different ways, and you may find some reactions difficult to deal with. If people don't know what to say it may help put them at their ease if you bring the subject up first.

You need to be prepared for the possibility that not everyone will be as supportive as you would like, and that can be hurtful. But lots of people will react well, so try not to withdraw from your friends or your social life.



'I found it far easier to bring the subject up first. It put everyone more at ease, including me, and everyone was supportive.'

OLLWYNNE

At first I didn't let my husband see me without anything covering my head. I don't know why because it certainly didn't bother him seeing me bald.' **RONA**



Treatments and hair loss

Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy uses anti-cancer drugs to destroy cancer cells. The chemotherapy drugs also damage healthy cells, including the cells in the hair follicles, which is why they can make your hair fall out. Because healthy cells repair themselves quickly, your hair will eventually grow back after treatment is finished.

Not all chemotherapy drugs cause your hair to fall out. Some drugs cause no hair loss, some cause hair to thin, while others cause complete hair loss. How much hair you lose will depend on the type of drugs you are given and the dose. Your specialist or your chemotherapy nurse will talk to you about your treatment and how likely you are to lose your hair.

Hair loss can happen suddenly, although it is usually more gradual and begins within two or three weeks of starting treatment. Your scalp may become tender as the hair thins and falls out. You may also find that you lose all your body hair, including eyebrows,

'I knew my hair was going to fall out because the chemotherapy nurse told me. After three weeks of chemo it fell out over about three days.' **KIM**

eyelashes and pubic hair, which can be a shock, especially if you are not prepared for it.

The hair loss caused by chemotherapy is temporary so your hair will start to grow back once your treatment is over. Sometimes it may even start to grow back before you finish your treatment. You may notice that the quality of your hair is different from before. It may be softer, or curlier, or you may have more grey hair. But after three to six months you should have a full covering of hair on your head. Other hair, such as your eyebrows and eyelashes, may grow back more quickly or more slowly.

'The hair on my head fell out very quickly. My pubic hair was next to go, which I hadn't really expected. My eyebrows and eyelashes started to come out after sessions two and three although they didn't go completely. I still had to shave my legs though!' **DIANE**

Radiotherapy

Radiotherapy uses high-energy x-rays to treat cancer. Like chemotherapy, it also affects healthy cells, but only in the specific area being treated. This means that you will only lose hair from that area. For example, if you are having radiotherapy to the breast and lymph glands in your armpit you will only lose underarm hair, and for men, chest hair.

After radiotherapy your hair will usually grow back, although it can take six to twelve months to grow back completely. You may find that the regrowth is patchy and it is also possible that the hair may not grow back at all. This will depend on the dose of radiotherapy and the number of treatments you have had. The radiographer or breast care nurse will talk to you about the likelihood of you losing your hair before treatment starts.

'Using a cold cap was really worth it. My hair thinned but it didn't fall out and you couldn't really see any difference. The inconvenience of spending extra time at the hospital was far outweighed by the fact that I kept my hair.' **LAYLA**

'I used a cold cap during the first session of chemo and it was pretty unpleasant. My body temperature dropped so much I was shaking violently. My partner had to hold a coffee cup to my mouth for me to sip as I couldn't keep any coffee in the cup when I held it! It also made me dizzy and gave me a headache. Unfortunately it didn't work anyway.' **JILL**

Preventing hair loss

Hair loss during radiotherapy cannot be prevented. However, with chemotherapy cooling the scalp can sometimes prevent or reduce hair loss. This technique works by reducing the blood flow to the hair follicles, which means that the amount of drugs that reaches the hair follicles is also reduced. Scalp cooling only works with certain drugs and its effectiveness also depends on the dose used. You can ask your specialist or chemotherapy nurse if scalp cooling is available and whether it would be suitable for you.

Cooling the scalp involves wearing a 'cold cap' while you are having chemotherapy drugs. There are different types of cold cap and ways of cooling the scalp, so the method will depend on what is available in your hospital. In general you will wear the cold cap for 15 minutes before you have your chemotherapy. You keep it on during your treatment and for up to two hours afterwards. You may find the cap uncomfortable, as it is very cold and often quite heavy. However, your chemotherapy nurse will make sure that you are as comfortable as possible, with your head and neck well supported. Some people do experience headaches, but these quickly wear off once the cap is removed.

Looking after your hair



Hair thinning, poor condition or a dry and itchy scalp can be caused by factors such as a poor diet, stress and alcohol. So as well as taking general steps to look after your hair, you may want to try other things, such as eating a healthy diet with lots of fresh fruit and vegetables and avoiding too much alcohol. Massaging the scalp may also help by improving the blood supply to the hair follicles.

During treatment

Whatever treatment you are receiving, it is a good idea to treat your hair as gently as possible. Even if chemotherapy doesn't make your hair fall out, it may make it brittle and dry. You may find the following tips helpful:

- use a mild, unperfumed shampoo and conditioner
- try not to wash your hair more than twice a week
- pat your hair dry rather than rubbing it
- brush or comb your hair gently with a soft hairbrush or wide-toothed plastic comb
- if you have long hair, avoid plaiting it as this may damage it
- avoid using elastic bands to tie back long hair



- avoid dyes, perms and other products containing strong chemicals
- avoid products containing alcohol, e.g. hair spray, which can irritate the scalp
- avoid excessive heat from heated rollers, hair dryers and hot brushes.

When you lose your hair

The first signs that you are losing your hair may be loose hair on the pillow in the morning or extra hair in your hairbrush. This can still be a shock even when you are prepared for it to happen. Again, there are things that you can do to help.

- You might want to think about having your hair cut short before your treatment starts, particularly if you have long hair. Or rather than wait for your hair to fall out you might decide to shave your head completely before it happens.
- You may want to wear a soft hat or turban in bed to collect loose hairs.

‘I kept my scalp warm with a turban around the house and in bed. It’s surprising how cold it can feel without hair!’ **DIANE**

- If you decide not to cover your head, remember to use a high protection factor sun cream at all times, as the scalp is particularly sensitive.
- If your scalp is dry, flaky or itchy you can use unperfumed moisturiser or natural oils such as almond or olive oil. You may prefer to use aromatherapy oils, but it is best to consult a trained aromatherapist, as the oils can be very strong.
- Avoid perfumed deodorants if you have lost hair under your arms from chemotherapy, as they can irritate the skin. Baby powder can be used instead. If you have lost your underarm hair through radiotherapy you shouldn't use anything until your skin has healed completely following treatment.



When your hair grows back

While your hair is growing back you need to continue to treat it with care.

- It is best to avoid perming or colouring your hair for at least six months after the end of treatment, as your hair may still be weak.
- If you do want to colour your hair, ask your hairdresser for advice on natural products such as henna or vegetable-based colour.

'After my first chemotherapy session I lost so much hair and the remainder was weak so I went to a hairdresser and had my head shaved! It was a lot less upsetting than I thought.' **JILL**



Covering up

Most women are more comfortable covering up with a wig, scarf or hat until their hair grows back. There are many different reasons for this, from keeping warm to concern about what other people might say. The information below will help you choose the best options for you.

Wigs

For many people, the first choice is to wear a wig. Wigs today are natural looking and comfortable. They can be made from human or synthetic hair or a mixture of both and are available in many different colours and styles.

At the moment you are entitled to a free wig if you are an inpatient when the wig is supplied. You are also eligible if you or your partner are on Income Support, Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance or Pension Credit guarantee credit. For more information, see Department of Health (DH) leaflet HC11 *Are you entitled to help with health costs?* If you are not eligible for a free wig you can still get one through the NHS at a subsidised rate (see DH leaflet HC12 *NHS charges and optical voucher values*).

Some hospitals have specialists who may be able to fit you with a wig or advise you about other wig suppliers. Choosing and being fitted with a wig can be a time when you are forced to face the reality of losing your hair, and it can be an upsetting experience. The wig specialists understand this and

'I was very happy when my hair grew back but also impatient – I just wanted it to grow longer faster!' **KIM**

will do their best to make you feel at ease.

The hospital may have a limited range, so if you are paying for your wig yourself you may prefer to go to a hairdresser, department store, wig retailer or theatrical costumier. This is usually more expensive. At present you don't have to pay VAT (Value Added Tax) on a wig when hair loss is caused by cancer treatments. To claim back the VAT you will need to complete a VAT form, which most stores will provide at the time of purchase, and send it off. The tax can't be claimed back at a later date.

Financial help towards the cost of a wig may be available from Macmillan Cancer Relief (see the list of useful addresses at the back of this booklet) but your doctor, nurse or social worker will need to apply on your behalf.

Choosing a wig

- Take a relative or friend with you to support you and help you choose.
- If it is important to you to match your wig to your hair colour and style, you may want to choose one before your hair actually falls out. Or you may decide to have a complete change.
- Remember that the wig can be cut and styled to make it look more natural and feel more personal. (It is a good idea to check that your hairdresser or wig consultant has experience of cutting wigs.)

'I had two wigs. I bought one privately and it was fine once my hairdresser had thinned it out. The second was NHS and brilliant. I was told the NHS ones were frumpy and granny-ish but they had a fantastic selection and the fitter and I had a great laugh.' **JILL**

'With a wig you have no bad hair days – it always looks the same.' **RONA**

'I bought my wig from a professional wig maker rather than buying a fashion wig in a department store. Paying a bit more made all the difference.' **KIM**

'Even though I had had my hair cut shorter before the treatment I decided to have a longer wig – I thought that if I had to wear a wig I may as well have one I liked.' **RONA**

'My hairdresser got me an excellent synthetic wig. It was on an open mesh base (which kept me cool) and had adjustable tabs fixed with Velcro to ensure a good fit at all times. It was so good that even close friends didn't realise it was a wig until I told them. Neither did the nine year olds I taught – and they would have asked questions if they had suspected anything!' **OLWYNNE**

- If you haven't yet lost your hair the wig should be quite tight when fitted so that it gives a good fit later on.
- Synthetic wigs are light and easy to care for. They are often pre-styled so can be washed and left to drip dry. They are also cheaper than real hair wigs.
- Real hair wigs are not usually available on the NHS. They can be bought privately, although they are more expensive than synthetic wigs. They need to be handled more carefully and may need professional cleaning and restyling.

Wearing a wig

- If you are worried about your wig falling off, try securing it with hypoallergenic double-sided tape, which is available from wig suppliers. One side of the tape sticks to the inside of the wig while the other side sticks to your scalp. When you take it off you can remove any leftover adhesive with surgical spirit. A wig specialist can also talk to you about other ways of securing your wig.
- Wigs can sometimes feel hot and itchy. You can try wearing a thin cotton lining or skullcap under your wig. You can buy these from wig suppliers or make your own from a cut down stocking or pair of tights.

- If you have an 'off-the-shelf' wig and wear it every day it will last about three to four months. After that the elastic gets looser and this affects the fit, although it may be possible to replace the elastic. You are entitled to a new wig on the NHS every six months if necessary.
- If you need to get undressed, for example at the doctor's or while out shopping for clothes, wear something that is easy to slip off rather than something that goes over your head.
- Avoid excessive heat or steam (such as from the oven or iron) if you have a synthetic wig as it can make the hair shrivel. Don't get too close to flames from cookers or candles, which can melt synthetic hair and frizz real hair.

Other headwear

Whether or not you wear a wig, there may be times when you want to cover up. Hats, scarves and turbans can be found in a wide variety of styles and colours. They can become a fashion accessory and can help you feel more confident about the way you look. As well as looking good, they can keep you warm in winter and protect your head from the sun in summer.

Some hospitals offer a service where you are shown different ways of tying scarves and a selection of suitable hats and other accessories. Ask your breast care nurse about services in your area or ring Breast Cancer Care's helpline.

'My wig took some getting used to but soon I could put it on in a couple of seconds. It was a bit of a worry when it was very windy but it never blew off and I put my hand on the side of my head as though I was trying to stop hair blowing in my eyes.' **DIANE**



'I wore a wig when I was out and just bought lots of fashion bandanas for wearing around the house.' **KIM**



'Someone from Breast Cancer Care showed me samples of hats to try on and how to tie scarves. I got bandanas, a cool 1920s-style winter hat and a cloche hat with different ties to go round it. I also bought turbans from the hospital shop to wear in bed and at home.' **RONA**

'I found out the hard way the importance of not having a smooth material for a scarf – when you're bald it slips off your head.'
DIANE

Scarves

Scarves made from soft cotton are best. A natural fabric allows the scalp to breathe, is gentle on the scalp and doesn't slip. Satin and silk materials can slide off the head more easily. You may want to try placing a foam shoulder pad on the crown of your head underneath the scarf to give a better head shape. There are some suggestions for different ways of tying scarves on the pull-out that comes with this booklet.

Hats

When looking for a hat, choose a style that can be pulled well down to cover your hairline. As well as specialist hat shops and department stores, wig and headwear suppliers also stock suitable hats (*see Finding out more* at the back of this booklet).

Turbans

Cotton or jersey turbans are light, comfortable and easy to wash. They are inexpensive and can be bought in some department stores, chemists, hospital shops and from wig suppliers.

Fringes

If you normally have a fringe you may feel that no matter what headwear you choose, you still don't look right. Worn under a scarf or hat, you may find that a fringe on a Velcro band makes all the difference. Fringes are available from wig suppliers.

You can also buy hairpieces that you can fix under the back of a hat to give the appearance of hair growing.

Eyelashes and eyebrows



If you lose your eyelashes you will probably find that your eyes get sore easily. Rinsing your eyes with saline (salt water) solution in an eye bath or egg cup can help reduce the soreness. Eyelashes can take up to a year to grow back fully, although they will usually grow back in about six months. They can sometimes grow back patchily. You may want to try false eyelashes, including single lashes, although some people may be sensitive to the glue used to stick them on. Make-up counters in department stores are a good source of help, or try your local beauty salon.

If you lose your eyebrows, or find that they are thinner, you may be very conscious of how that alters the way you look. You can recreate a natural appearance by using eyebrow make-up in a shade that matches your hair colour. Again, make-up counter staff can be very helpful, or there are some instructions for eyebrow make-up on the pull-out with this booklet.



Changing the emphasis

Some people feel more confident if attention is directed away from their hair and their head. There are a number of simple ways of doing this. You might try wearing eye-catching jewellery or bright-coloured tops. You could experiment with make-up, using new colours on your lips or eyes. Some hospitals run a *'Look Good Feel Better'* programme where you will get expert advice on make-up and skin care. Ask your breast care or chemotherapy nurse if there is a programme in any of your local hospitals.

Finding out more

Hair loss programmes

Hair loss programmes are run around the country by Breast Cancer Care and other organisations. For details of services in your area, ask your breast care nurse or ring Breast Cancer Care's freephone helpline on 0808 800 6000 (textphone 0808 800 6001).

Headwear and wig suppliers

Here is a selection of suppliers of wigs, headwear and accessories. You can find other suppliers in the phone book or via the Internet.

BlackCare UK Limited

PO Box 2169, Woodford Green IG8 0NE

Telephone: 020 8252 2488/7810

Fax: 020 8252 2488

Email: info@blackcareuk.com

Website: www.blackcareuk.com

Supplies wigs for people from black and ethnic minority communities.

C&E Headwear

PO Box 518, Haywards Heath, West Sussex RH17 7DY

Telephone/Fax: 01825 791337

Email: pfrank@pavilion.co.uk

Mail order service providing a range of headwear especially designed for those experiencing hair loss.

Hats 4 Heads

PO Box 407, Altrincham, Cheshire WA15 9WX

Telephone: 0161 941 6748

Email: info@hats4heads.co.uk

Website: www.hats4heads.co.uk

A range of hats designed especially for people who have lost their hair through illness.

Headline Hats

PO Box 33415, London SW18 2FQ

Telephone: 020 8874 1099 (9.30am-5pm)

Fax: 020 8874 0987

Email: sales@headlinehats.co.uk

Website: www.headlinehats.co.uk

Mail-order service providing a range of headwear suitable for women experiencing hair loss.

Necessity Headwear

3 Eleanor Road, Waltham Cross, Hertfordshire EN8 7DW

Telephone/Fax: 01992 307273

Email: necessityheadwear@hotmail.com

A range of alternative headwear for women with hair loss.

New Overseas Traders

5 Hilliers Yard, Marlborough, Wiltshire SN8 1BE

Telephone: 01672 851166

Fax: 01672 851742

Email: info@newoverseastraders.co.uk

Mail-order service providing a range of specially designed 100% cotton scarves and accessories.

Trendco

112/116 Sheridan House, Western Road, Hove, East Sussex
BN3 1DD

Telephone: 01273 774977/777503

Fax: 01273 720116

Email: info@trendco.co.uk

Website: wigsattrendco.co.uk

Wig suppliers with mail-order service and branches in
Birmingham, Brighton and London.

Trends Wigs & Hairpieces

337 Glossop Road, Sheffield, South Yorkshire S10 2GZ

Telephone: 0114 276 8676

Email: info@trends.me.uk

Website: www.trends.me.uk

Specialists with a wide range of wigs available by mail order
or appointment in Sheffield or Rotherham.

Wigs4u

PO Box 9, Wisbech, Cambs PE13 1HN

Telephone: 01945 587584

Fax: 01945 464444

Email: enquiries@wigs4u.co.uk

Website: www.wigs4u.com

Specialists with a range of wigs and accessories available by
mail order or appointment.

Wills Wigs

Suite 7&8, Holt Studios, 49 Birmingham Road, Bromsgrove,
Worcestershire B61 0DR

Telephone: 01527 871709

Fax: 01527 559443

Email: info@willswigs.co.uk

Website: www.willswigs.co.uk

Wig specialists with an extensive range of hats, scarves and turbans available by appointment or mail order.

Useful addresses

Look Good Feel Better

Albany House
Claremont Lane
Esher
Surrey KT10 9DA

Telephone: 01372 470900

Fax: 01372 470959

Website: www.lgfb.co.uk

Look Good Feel Better offers professionally run beauty workshops in hospitals around the country for women living with cancer.

CancerBACUP

3 Bath Place
Rivington Street
London EC2A 3JR

Office: 020 7696 9003

Freephone helpline: 0808 800 1234 (Mon-Fri, 9am-7pm)

Email: info@cancerbacup.org

Website: www.cancerbacup.org.uk

CancerBACUP is the leading national information and support charity for people affected by cancer. Services include a helpline, staffed by specialist cancer information nurses, a website, cancer information booklets and local information centres. All CancerBACUP services are free to people affected by cancer.

Macmillan Cancer Relief

89 Albert Embankment

London SE1 7UQ

Telephone: 020 7840 7840

Macmillan CancerLine: 0808 808 2020

Textphone: 0808 808 0121

Email: cancerline@macmillan.org.uk

Website: www.macmillan.org.uk

Macmillan Cancer Relief is helping people who are living with cancer through the provision of immediate practical and emotional support. Specialist services include Macmillan nurses and doctors, cancer centres, a range of cancer information and direct financial help. The Macmillan CancerLine provides information and emotional support. Textphone available.

Central Office

Breast Cancer Care

Kiln House 210 New Kings Road

London SW6 4NZ

Telephone 020 7384 2984

Fax 020 7384 3387

Email info@breastcancercare.org.uk

Centres

Breast Cancer Care Scotland

Telephone 0141 221 2244

Email sco@breastcancercare.org.uk

Breast Cancer Care Cymru

Telephone 029 2023 4070

Email cym@breastcancercare.org.uk

Breast Cancer Care North & Midlands

Telephone 0114 276 0296

Email nrc@breastcancercare.org.uk

Breast Cancer Care London & South

Telephone 020 7566 5880

Email src@breastcancercare.org.uk

For all breast cancer or breast health concerns, call our free, national helpline on 0808 800 6000 (textphone 0808 800 6001) or visit www.breastcancercare.org.uk.

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Breast Cancer Care relies on donations from the public to provide its services free to clients. If you would like to make a donation, please send your cheque to: Breast Cancer Care, Freepost Lon 644, London SW6 4BR. Or donate via our website at www.breastcancercare.org.uk/donations.

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