

# Side effects - managing hair loss



## This information offers suggestions to help with managing hair loss.

*“When in turmoil or doubt, choose change. I chose change to ‘control a controllable’ – cutting my long hair short then shorter still and dyed in two bright colours. On the first day of my chemotherapy I shaved it. I’m enjoying the opportunity to reinvent, create and embrace the ‘new me’.” Rachel*

## Why hair loss occurs

Some people don’t lose their hair during treatment for cancer. Other people find that their hair becomes thin and dry while others lose all the hair from their head and their body. Whether this happens to you depends on what medication you are given.

If you do lose your hair it is usually a result of receiving

some chemotherapy medications and your cancer treatment team will advise you if this is a likely side-effect of your treatment. Your hair may start to fall out two or three weeks after your first treatment, or it may take a while. Your scalp may feel hot or itchy just before your hair starts to fall out.

Radiation to the head or scalp, however, can cause permanent hair loss. Depending on where radiation is directed, you may also experience hair loss on your legs, arms, underarms, pubic area, chest, eyelashes, eyebrows, and the beard area.

Hormonal therapies rarely cause complete hair loss, but some people may notice that their hair becoming thinner and drier. Some targeted therapies can lead to hair thinning.

## Hair regrowth after treatment

After treatment finishes, your hair will re-grow slowly, between 4 to 12 months. When your hair does grow back, it will probably be a different texture and different colour. For example, sometimes curly hair grows back straight, or dark hair becomes lighter. These changes are usually not permanent. Your head may be quite itchy as your hair begins to grow back.

Talk to your treatment team about what to expect. You might want to ask them if your hair is likely to be affected by treatment and if and when, it might grow back.

## Managing hair loss

Losing your hair can be upsetting but for most people hair will grow back. Until it does you might want to wear a wig, scarf or a hat. If you choose a wig it is a good idea to look at wigs before you start losing your hair so you can make sure it matches your style and colour.

If you have children or grandchildren, they may find it upsetting to see you without any hair. Let them know that it is going to happen. Tell them about what, if anything, you are going to wear on your head and let them know when your hair will grow back.



## Government subsidies

The Government offers a subsidy to help pay for the cost of wigs, headwear or eyebrow and associated products. You will need to fill in a wig and hairpiece claim form and get a certificate from your cancer treatment team. You can find out more about this subsidy on the Ministry of Health website:

<https://www.health.govt.nz/new-zealand-health-system/claims-provider-payments-and-entitlements/wigs-and-hairpieces-subsidy>

## Protecting your scalp

Some people don't bother with wigs and they stay bald or cover up with scarves or hats. There is no medical reason for having to cover up your head. However, your scalp will be more sensitive to the sun than normal, so you should wear a hat and a high-protection sunscreen (SPF 30+) on your scalp when you are in the sun. In the winter your head may feel much colder than it normally would.

## Tips for looking after your hair:

- Try cutting your hair short before chemotherapy. The weight of long hair pulling on the scalp can make hair fall out earlier.
- Use gentle hair products and conditioner for dry hair.
- Pat hair dry after washing it and gently brush with a wide-toothed comb.
- Avoid using hairdryers, straighteners, tongs or curlers.
- Avoid perming or colouring your hair if it is brittle or your scalp is dry.
- If you want to colour your hair, use a mild, vegetable-based colourant and test a strand of your hair first – ask your hairdresser for advice.
- Some hairdressers suggest that it is best to wait for six months after treatment before colouring your hair.

## Losing your eyebrows and eyelashes

There are make-up techniques that you can use to draw in eyebrows if you lose hair in this area, or you can have your eyebrows tattooed on if your hair loss is expected to be permanent. If your eyes are irritated due to the loss of eyelashes, ask your cancer treatment team about eye drops that may help.

## Look Good feel Better workshops

*Look Good Feel Better* help people affected by cancer to manage the appearance-related side-effects of cancer treatment. It provides free practical classes with skincare, make-up and headwear demonstrations. The goal is that participants leave feeling empowered and ready to face their cancer diagnoses with confidence. There also classes for men.

You can find out more about these workshops on their website [www.lgfb.co.nz](http://www.lgfb.co.nz).

## Where else to find support

- Join a support group. You'll get plenty of emotional support and it may help you feel less alone. Plus, you will share valuable tips for coping and receive helpful guidance.
- Talk to someone else who has had hair loss. Ask your local Cancer Society about a referral to Cancer Connect.
- Talk to a social worker or counsellor who can help you find resources, make difficult decisions, and feel more in control, or call our cancer help line on 0800 226 237.
- Contact the Cancer Society as we may have turbans or patterns for turbans and information on wig and head covering suppliers in your area.

The quality of your life during and after chemotherapy or radiation treatment can be enhanced by preparing yourself in advance for hair loss. Don't be afraid to talk to your GP or treatment team and seek emotional support.

## More information

- Be.Macmillan: Coping with side effects <http://be.macmillan.org.uk/Downloads/CancerInformation/CancerTypes/MAC12921E04NSideFXLowresPDF20190221.pdf>
- Cancer Council Australia: Hair loss fact sheet

[https://www.cancer.org.au/content/about\\_cancer/factsheets/Hair\\_loss\\_fact\\_sheet\\_July\\_2019.pdf#\\_ga=2.155063928.1190411795.1570477580-904993833.1569969689](https://www.cancer.org.au/content/about_cancer/factsheets/Hair_loss_fact_sheet_July_2019.pdf#_ga=2.155063928.1190411795.1570477580-904993833.1569969689)