

Alopecia Areata

Alopecia areata is a fairly common, non-contagious, non-scarring hair loss disease that affects more than 1% of men, women and children in the United States. In alopecia areata, round patches of hair loss appear suddenly. The hair loss is often discovered by a barber or hairdresser. The hair-growing tissue stops making hair and the hair then falls out from the roots.

Causes

It is currently accepted that alopecia areata is caused by an auto-immune response of your own body. The theory holds that sometime after birth, we are exposed to an "insult" (a virus or disclosure of a previously secluded protein) against which our immune system defends itself. Here's the problem: the portion of protein exposed by this insult closely resembles an intrinsic protein sequence within the hair follicles' cells. The end result is that the immune system attacks the hair follicle in a case of mistaken identity.

Whatever the initiation factor it need not be long-lasting—rather a short, sharp block may be just enough to tip the balance of the immune system into auto-immunity. Once an auto-immune disease is initiated it can be self-perpetuating.

Alopecia areata is not contagious, is not caused by foods, and is not the result of nervousness. The first episode of alopecia areata is most likely to occur in the late teens to early twenties - particularly for women. Statistical research shows that on average 20% of people with alopecia areata report having at least one other blood relative with the condition.

Diagnosis

There is currently no conclusive diagnostic test for alopecia areata. Alopecia areata is characterized by the sudden appearance of a round or oval patch of non-scarring and painless hair loss with spontaneous remissions and exacerbations. The patches are well defined. A few people complain of itching in the scalp before or during the loss of hair. The scalp is the most commonly affected area, but alopecia areata can present in any region of hair on the body.

Alopecia areata is the "umbrella term" that refers to patchy hair loss, total (or near total) loss on the scalp (a. totalis) and combined loss of scalp, facial and body hair (a. universalis).

Treatment

Hair usually grows back by itself, but slowly. Sometimes the new hair is temporarily gray or white, but after awhile the original color usually returns. However, there is no permanent cure for alopecia areata and there is no universally proven therapy for inducing remission.

Applications of minoxidil (Rogaine) to the scalp sometimes stimulate hair growth in male-pattern hair loss. Unfortunately, it doesn't grow hair in cases of alopecia areata.

Spontaneous Hair Regrowth

Alopecia areata runs an unpredictable course. It may only last for a short period of time and normal hair growth can be quickly reestablished within months. About 65% of people who have alopecia areata have just one or two patches of hair loss which usually enter remission after 6 months to 2 years after first diagnosis with or without treatment. However, that leaves 35% or more who have more persistent hair loss. Only 7% of people with alopecia areata progress to total scalp hair loss.

Test Results and Advice Nurse

Please call the nurse for test results and advice: 863-4463

Appointments

Appointments can be made in person or by phone. If you are unable to keep your appointment, please call and cancel. Otherwise you will be charged for the visit.

To schedule or cancel appointments, call: 863-0774

For more information about health care issues, visit the UHS Web site at www.sa.psu.edu/uhs

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