



*Hair and
chemotherapy*

*useful advices for those who have to start a
chemotherapy treatment*

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Does chemotherapy cause hair loss?



The wig



The makeup



The psychological aspects

*Even the trees lose their leaves
but then spring comes*

Does chemotherapy cause hair loss?

(By Dr. Incoronata Romaniello, medical oncologist at SSVD of Oncology PO in Borgomanero)

Not all chemotherapy drugs cause alopecia, which is the complete loss of hair and body hair.

In fact some chemotherapy drugs do not cause hair loss or the phenomenon is so modest as to pass unnoticed while others such as anthracyclines and taxanes cause complete alopecia sometimes even with loss of eyelashes and eyebrows.

For this reason it is important, before starting a chemotherapy treatment, to ask the oncologist whether the therapy programmed will cause alopecia, so that one can be psychologically prepared to face it.

In fact the hair loss that usually occurs after 15-20 days from the start of chemotherapy is rapid and massive and, if not expected, can be very traumatizing.

Even though hair loss caused by chemotherapy is transitory, which means the hair grows back within a month or so from the end of the treatment and sometimes even more beautiful than before, this temporary modification of one's aspect disturb not only women but also men.

Adequate information allows the patient to be psychologically but also practically prepared to this body modification. Finally it is important to know that the reaction of each patient to chemotherapy treatment is very subjective and therefore the intensity, speed and extent of hair loss can vary from person to person.

What should be done before and during chemotherapy?

In case the oncologist tells you that the chemotherapy treatment programmed will cause alopecia, it will be useful to have a very short hair cut before starting. This allows a less rapid hair loss and so psychologically it is less devastating to loose short hair compared to entire locks. It will also be possible to choose and wear a wig or caps or scarves in order to be psychologically

prepared to the new look.

It is better to wear a wig, scarves, turbans and caps even at home. The wig should be chosen before hair loss so that can be bought one as similar as possible to the color and structure of your natural hair.

If the drugs used do not cause a complete hair loss, it will be anyway advisable to take good care of it. Here some useful tips:

- use mild shampoos
- do not stress your hair with treatments such as perm, hair dyes with aggressive chemicals, neither during chemotherapy nor for the following 3 months. Natural dyes are allowed.
- avoid brushing or combing hair vigorously. The use of soft bristle brushes is recommended
- avoid hair dryer, curling irons and curlers, it's better dry your hair by dabbing it with a towel.
- keep short hair.

The wig

(By Patrizio Faraci,
Farcaphair - Laratupon Novara Division)

The purchase of a wig must take into account the following factors:

- > Aesthetic appearance
- > Psychological aspect
- > Transpiration of the product
- > Professionalism of the supplier

Generally it is advisable not to change your physiognomy, as those who know you and are unaware of your difficult moment, not noticing important changes, will not ask you indiscreet questions making you feel not at ease. The psychological aspect is central, so we must always remember that it is a transitory moment that must be lived as such. The professionals will be able to advise you in the best possible way and will take care of your image. Today there are different types of wigs ranging from classic synthetics to special and natural fibers. The wigs with natural hair are similar in structure, are treatable with heat sources, light dyes and any styling and are handmade.

Special fiber wigs guarantee an image similar to real hair, have an excellent quality and are easy to use. They have some small limitations compared to real hair, but all in all the beauty of these wigs allows not only to ease the momentary discomfort, but also to make the problem unnoticed to others. The materials of these wigs (natural and special fiber) guarantee accurate transpiration and are also very light to wear. Every single wig needs careful maintenance that the technicians will explain to you.

It is useful, when wearing a wig, to put on makeup, use necklaces and some jewelry, wear dresses, shirts and sweaters with bright patterns because these small tricks help to look away from the hair, giving a more sparkling look. A suggestion is to go out without hesitation and with ease: this will help you to gain more confidence in yourself.

Makeup

(By Nicoletta Ricci, makeup artist)

Makeup can be a good solution to correct serious or permanent imperfections and also for patients undergoing chemotherapy treatment. Camouflage can be used both from an aesthetic and psychological point of view, as a valid support to overcome discomfort and increase self-esteem.

In case of patients under chemotherapy, hair loss, associated with the disappearance of eyelashes and eyebrows, is often experienced as a serious problem. Suggesting the use of a precise corrective makeup, easy to perform and with a natural effect can greatly improve the approach with one's body image.

Camouflage products, designed to cover various kinds of imperfections, are formulated with hypoallergenic criteria. Furthermore they are long lasting, waterproof and contain a sun filter. By using a water-resistant eye liner, it is possible to outline the upper and lower eyelid rims to give greater intensity to the eyelash-free eyes and to draw the hair-free eyebrow arches with a special brush.

For those who do not intend to wear makeup every day and want a practical and particularly lasting solution, it is possible to intervene on the eyes and eyebrows with semi-permanent makeup, that is a corrective tattoo that can be maintained even after the natural regrowth of previously fallen hair.

Also in this case the colors used are non-toxic, hypoallergenic and with a very natural effect, specially designed for facial features. The duration of the treatments varies from person to person and it can be periodically retouched.

I personally consider this method particularly effective, precisely because of its characteristics, precision and resistance: the patient is not forced to apply makeup every day, having it already perfect at any time.

Psychological aspects

(By Dr. Micaela Longo, psycho-oncologist at Psicologia Clinica of ASL NO - Novara)

"Doctor, will I lose my hair with this chemotherapy?"

"Is there a treatment that will not make me lose my hair?"

"Is this treatment really necessary?"

These are frequently asked questions that people with cancer ask their doctor and are an expression of a major concern that haunts their minds.

Sometimes it is hard to understand the deeper meaning of these questions and the problems associated with hair loss, underestimating its severity and belittling it with comments such as: *"With what the patient has experienced, the least of the problems is her hair loss"*.

This matter, however, is not so simple, since some patients, just to avoid hair loss, are not quite sure to carry out chemotherapy treatments.

From a psychological point of view even hair, like any other part of the body, helps to create one's own image, which is not a distinct dimension but is connected to identity, personal integrity and self-esteem. Body image is the mental representation that everyone has of one's own body: how it is seen in front of the mirror, but also how it is felt and lived.

Over time people got used to know themselves in a certain way and this gives everybody a sense of continuity and security.

A body change is therefore not only perceived on a physical level, but also psychologically and emotionally precisely because it has repercussions in more subjective dimensions: *"I feel different "*, *"I do not recognize myself"*, *"It is not me anymore "*.

These experiences are common to both sexes and hair loss is a major problem for both women and men. Contrary to what is commonly thought, also men tolerate with difficulty this change caused so suddenly by illness and treatments.

This reaction is also related to the daily social demand by media and advertising to be young and good-looking all the time.

In women accustomed to long and thick hair, this moment is even more painful and destabilizing. For a woman, hair has many meanings: it is an expression of femininity, a weapon of seduction, a way to communicate something about herself and an opportunity for change.

It is no coincidence that before starting chemotherapy women with long hair are recommended to have a short cut which makes the moment of hair loss a little less complicated allowing a more gradual transition.

Alopecia has a huge and instant impact on the person. During the difficult moment of reaction to the cancer-diagnosis - in which an attempt to overcome the fears associated with it is made and a precarious balance is sought - hair loss brings to mind, continuously and without distinction, the situation of need for treatment and hence the disease. Often people in therapy would not want to be seen without hair because they are the first to fear this moment and do not recognize themselves. To these distressing personal experiences of fear, sadness, anger, misunderstanding is added the anxiety caused by others' judgement: *"What will people say?"*.

In the social context in which we live, hair, face and hands are exposed and generally not covered parts of the body. Since the head is an easily visible part, the problem is continuously present since we see ourselves in mirrors - in shops and car windows - practically everywhere. Furthermore, since the patient experiences it as a problem, he/she thinks that it is also a problem for others and has the impression that everybody is looking, observing or scrutinizing every little detail in order to comment and criticize afterwards. These thoughts deeply interfere with social life by reducing outings and interpersonal contacts and affecting patients' mood.

If almost always hair loss arouses common and shared emotional experiences, the behavioral reactions nevertheless change and can be very different, depending on the personality and the living environment.

A first possibility is the closure in oneself and the distancing from social moments. This behavior represents the tendency to escape the problem with the hope or the illusion that at the end of therapies everything can magically be solved. Another more functional possibility to the patient's well-being is finding a decisive compromise, to try to deal with the situation of comparison with others, these may be: a foulard, a hat or a wig. Some people feel at ease wearing a headdress, choosing it from various shapes and colors, perhaps because they are used to wear it or because they consider the maintenance easier than the wig. Other people prefer the wig as they want to keep their appearance, thus giving continuity to their body image.

This choice often gives self-confidence as it seems that nothing has changed. In fact, once the perplexities about how to wear it, keep it steady and the fear of others' judgement have been overcome, the patient will be at ease while meeting other people.

We must also remember and reflect on the temporary nature of hair loss, because it is an important factor in adapting to the new self-image.

Finally, it must be remembered that the patient should choose the option that seems to respond best to her/his needs: bareheaded, with a headdress or a wig, as long as she/he feels comfortable.

These apparently simple measures on emotional aspects can actually help dealing with some difficulties. In fact, are important since they allow the beginning of a highly functional adaptation process, which eases the active role of the patient in the treatment and fight against cancer.

And while growing up you learn

And while growing up you learn that happiness has nothing to do with great things.

It is not the one pursued at 20, when you fight the world like a gladiator to be the winner...

Happiness is not the one eagerly pursued, believing that love is all or nothing. It has nothing to do with strong emotions exploding out with spectacular thunders, with skyscrapers to climb, with challenges to win, testing yourself all the time...

While growing up you learn that happiness is made up of small but precious things...

... and you learn that the scent of coffee in the morning is a little ritual of happiness, the notes of a song, the sensations given by a good book, the scents of food, poems, the affection of your cat or your dog are enough to feel a light happiness.

And you learn that happiness is made of slight emotions, of small explosions that quietly widen your heart. A starry sky can move you and the sun can make your eyes shine and you learn that a field of sunflowers can light your face, that the scent of spring wakes you up from winter and that reading under the shade of a tree relaxes and frees your thoughts.

And you learn that love is made up of delicate sensations, of small sparks in the stomach, of close even if distant presences, and you learn that time expands and that those 5 minutes are precious and longer than many hours, and you learn that you have just to close your eyes, ignite your senses, prepare a good meal, read a poem, write in a diary or look at a photo to cancel time and distances and be with the ones you love.

And you learn that hearing a voice on the telephone, receiving an unexpected message are small moments of joy.

And you learn to keep small but precious dreams in the drawer and in your heart.

*And you learn that holding a baby in the arms is a delightful joy.
And you learn that the best presents are the ones who remind you of your beloved ones...*

And you learn that happiness is also made up of the urgency of writing down your thoughts, that there is something bitterly happy even in melancholy.

And you learn that despite your defenses, despite your will or your destiny, in every flying seagull there is a little-big Jonathan Livingstone. And you learn how beautiful and grand simplicity is.

(Anonymous)

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