

## Hair Today-Gone Tomorrow: Alopecia Areata

by Teresa Hoff

It had been a hectic day at work. As she headed home, Katerina could only think of one thing: a shower. It was just the thing to help her relax and feel refreshed. However, this particular shower ended up unnerving her. As she stood in front of the mirror, working the warm air from the dryer through her blonde hair, something caught her eye: a bald spot about two inches around. Not one strand of hair was left in the bare patch. She was only 20 years old and healthy, or so she thought. She was devastated. But, she visited her doctor the next day, and, after proper testing, she was informed that her condition was one of the many forms of Alopecia. To be specific it was Alopecia Areata, which is thought to be an autoimmune disease that affects young and old, male and female, and shows no prejudice to race. The National Alopecia Areata Foundation states that over 4.5 million Americans, like Katerina, will develop this disease ("What"). In addition, studies show that women under the age of 30 have a higher rate Alopecia Areata than that of the general public (Watson). Fortunately, knowledge of the causes, psychological effects, and treatments for Alopecia Areata may give victims and their loved ones a better understanding of this devastating disease.

At present, no one really knows what brings about Alopecia Areata, but there are several likely causes. It is thought that the body's own infection fighting white blood cells, known as T-lymphocytes, attack the lower part of the hair follicles. While the cells don't kill the follicles, they do signal them to stop growing hair. Another possible cause is an infection known as helicobacter pylori. It brings about other autoimmune responses. While the exact cause for the disease is still being determined, researchers have found that heredity is involved. One out of five patients with Alopecia Areata has had a family history of it. Studies have also indicated that this disease carries family histories of asthma, allergies, eczema, or other autoimmune diseases. It is also shown that low-levels of a key thyroid hormone may be the cause of this disease. Nevertheless, doctors do agree that whatever the cause of Alopecia Areata is, it is not infectious and the people with this disease are not contagious. Basically, more research is needed to find the true cause of this disease.

Unlike the causes, the psychological effects of Alopecia Areata are pretty well-known. In a world where so much emphasis is based on looks, it is no surprise that those suffering from Alopecia Areata suffer from emotional and psychological ups and downs. Without their hair, people with this disease see their lives as being destroyed. As a result, it is not uncommon for sufferers to show a low self-esteem, become depressed, and have experiences with anxiety disorders or social phobias. As explained in a July 27, 1999, issue of The Guardian, a British publication, a study conducted by a group called Hairline International showed that 48% of the patients had told of contemplating taking their own lives, 68% had stated that their jobs had been destroyed, and 40% had said their marriages had been disrupted ("Health"). Amidst the "lows," there are often "highs" since Alopecia Areata has the ability to unpredictably appear and disappear. Obviously, these shifts in emotions can create stress for the patients, but family members also undergo an extreme amount of pressure. Parents may feel responsible for their child's condition, or spouses may feel the same loss as their loved ones do. For these reasons counseling may be beneficial for the entire family. It is equally crucial for patients with this disease to seek out the support and help available to them through counseling and support groups. Although this disease can be psychologically devastating, there are ways to overcome even the most difficult times.

One of the best ways for victims to cope with the physical aspects of the ailment is to undergo medical treatment to help the hair re-grow. One factor that is considered in the treatment is the level of the disease. Studies show that milder forms of Alopecia, involving less than 50% of hair loss, responded better to treatment than the more advanced cases. Nevertheless, for the milder forms there are such treatments as cortisone injections, anthralin cream, and topical minoxidil, also known as Rogaine. These treatments are done on a regular basis and are fairly safe, with little or no side effects. However, in the more extensive forms of Alopecia, treatments may involve cortisone pills. These pills, which are stronger than the injection, when taken for any extended length of time, have health risks. For this reason, few patients are considered for this treatment. Another side effect of cortisone pills is that after they are discontinued the newly re-grown hair usually falls out again. Another treatment method for the more severe cases is topical immunotherapy. Patients choosing this method should be prepared to make

weekly visits with their doctors and after hair growth has occurred, maintain upkeep with occasional, routine visits. A study explained in Dermatology Nursing of Oct. 1999 states that the preferred topical immunotherapy agent of choice is diphenycyclo-propenone (DPCP), and although it is not yet accepted by the FDA, it has been in use for over a decade. As a result, patients must consent to this treatment, which shows a 58% rate of success (MacDonald). Another completely different approach to treating this disease would be the use of oils. An Archive of Dermatology study found success with oils like rosemary, cedarwood, thyme, and lavender, which have been used for over a century for treating Alopecia (Graedon and Graedon). As can be seen, there aren't a lot of alternatives for treatment of this disease, but, for now, patients should rely on them.

In conclusion, Alopecia can strike anyone, at anytime. And, like Katerina, people that do contract this disease need to be educated on all the aspects, most importantly the causes, the psychological effects, and the treatments. While bald may be beautiful to some, to others it may be devastating.

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