

After treatment – wigs and hair loss

This information is an extract from the booklet, *Coping with hair loss*. You may find the full booklet helpful. We can send you a copy free – see page 8.

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Hair products

As your hair grows back, you can use a shampoo that helps you and your hair/scalp condition. Most shampoos can be used on a regular daily basis without any problems. However, if you notice that your scalp becomes irritated or the condition of your hair changes, seek professional advice.

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Tinting, colouring and perming

Once your hair is long enough, you can have it tinted or permed. It's always best to seek professional advice when you have your hair first tinted or permed after radiotherapy or chemotherapy. A professional hairdresser can check that any colours, perms or tints used on your hair do not damage it or cause an allergic reaction. They can also advise you about how to care for your hair after colouring or perming it.

You should not use any chemicals such as perms or tints on your hair without seeking professional advice if:

- your scalp is scaly, sore, or irritated
- your hair is drier than usual
- your hair is rough to the touch
- your hair is lighter in colour than before your treatment
- your hair appears to be breaking or not growing normally.

If you want to colour your hair, ask your hairdresser for advice on natural products such as henna or vegetable-based colours. If you use a henna product, be aware that the colour the henna produces may be more intense after chemotherapy treatment. Before choosing a vegetable-based colour, check the label to see whether any chemicals have been added. Many products that claim to be natural actually contain chemicals which may very occasionally cause an allergic reaction.

To make sure that any colours will not damage your hair and that you won't have a reaction to them, you should always try the colour on a small, hidden area of hair and scalp 48 hours before applying it to the rest of your hair. If you don't experience any increased sensitivity or problems with the colour test within 48 hours, then it's safe to apply it.

Fine or wispy hair

Hair extensions can thicken fine or wispy hair and can be clipped onto your hair. This isn't suitable for weak or thin hair so is not advisable for people who have just had chemotherapy or radiotherapy. Hair extensions are not available on the NHS.

Wigs and hairpieces

One practical way of coping with hair loss is to wear a wig or hairpiece. Nowadays there are many different styles and colours to choose from and they are very natural looking and comfortable to wear. Some manufacturers also provide wigs for people from black and ethnic minority communities.

Wigs can be made of human or synthetic hair (monofibre), or a mixture of both.

There is a more limited choice of styles for men, and it can be more difficult to find suitable wigs or hairpieces.

Human hair wigs may be made from different hair types such as European hair, or Asian hair which is normally bleached and then dyed to European colours. They can cost from a few hundred to a few thousand pounds for European hair wigs and are not usually available on the NHS. They often look more natural and last longer than synthetic wigs.

Some human hair wigs need regular dry cleaning, setting and blow-drying by a professional, which can be expensive. Other wigs, including some European hair wigs can be shampooed and styled at home on a specially designed wig head block – your wig-maker can advise you about this. It can help to have two wigs so that you can wear one while the other is being cleaned.

Synthetic (acrylic) wigs are cheaper than real hair wigs, and are light and easier to look after. They can cost anything from fifty to several hundred pounds, but may be free on the NHS. The style is heat-sealed into the hair so that they can be hand-washed with shampoo, left to drip-dry overnight and are then ready to wear. They can be combed or brushed through gently.

They usually last for around 6–9 months. Hair spray can be used if necessary, but avoid using too much as this can make the hair look dull and less natural. All wigs come with instructions on how to look after them and you should follow these carefully.

Choosing your wig

The nurses on the ward can arrange for a wig-fitter to visit you and help you choose a style and colour that suits you. It's always a good idea to take a relative or friend with you to help you make the decision.

Some people like to choose their wig before their hair falls out so that they can match the style and colour. The advantage of this is that if you lose your hair more quickly than expected you will already be prepared. It also gives you a chance to get used to the wig before you really need it. If your hair has not yet fallen out, the wig should be quite tight so that it gives a good fit later on. Some wigs adjust to any head size.

There is no pressure on you to choose a wig immediately and you can always leave the decision until you feel ready. If you have a hairdresser you trust, you may find it useful to speak to them first.

Most hospitals will supply wigs to people having treatment as outpatients, but this does not happen in all hospitals. If they don't supply a wig they should be able to tell you how to get one fitted.

If you don't want the wig or hairpiece to change the way you look you should:

- Choose the same volume of hair as you had before. Too much hair can make it look obvious that you're wearing a wig. If in doubt, choose a wig with very slightly less hair than you had before. Remember that the wig can be cut and styled by your hairdresser or the wig consultant.
- Choose your own colour or one shade lighter. If the hair is darker than your natural colour, it can look strange to your friends and draws attention to the change. Generally a change to a lighter colour will be less noticeable.

- Remember that when choosing a wig or hairpiece that as your hair falls out you will need a smaller size. Try to get a size which adjusts to any head size.
- If you have a good hairdresser they could help you choose a wig and, if necessary, restyle it.
- If you have any questions about your wig or how to look after it, check with the manufacturer or your hairdresser.

Another approach is to treat this as a chance to try a completely different style or colour, to have a little fun and to surprise your family, friends and colleagues. Wigs are available in various colours if you fancy being outrageous.

Fitting your wig

This can be an emotional time as you are forced to face up to the reality of losing your hair. The wig specialists will understand your feelings and will do all they can to make you feel comfortable and at ease during your fitting.

If all your hair has fallen out and the wig is slipping, you can get sticky pads to hold it in place. Some pads are hypoallergenic, which means they are less likely to cause a skin reaction. These can be helpful if your skin is sensitive due to chemotherapy or radiotherapy.

Paying for your wig

In the NHS

Currently you are entitled to a free acrylic wig on the NHS if you are having, or have had, cancer treatment and:

- you are an inpatient in hospital when the wig is supplied
- you or your partner are claiming Pension Credit Guarantee Credit, Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance or Disability Working Allowance, Income related Employment and Support Allowance.
- you have an NHS tax credit exemption certificate

- are named on an HC2 certificate
- you are under 16 years old or between 16 and 19 years old and in full-time education.

Even if your situation does not fit any of these conditions, some hospitals may still provide you with a free wig.

The Department of Health leaflet *Are you Entitled to Help With Health Costs? (HC11)* can tell you whether you are entitled to a free wig from the NHS. You can get a copy of the leaflet from your post office, staff at the hospital or you can download a copy from the website (dh.gov.uk). Another leaflet, *Charges and Optical Voucher Values (HC12)*, gives information about how much wigs cost. You can get a copy of this from your post office or download it from the website.

If you are not entitled to a free wig you can still get one from the hospital at a subsidised price. You will need to apply for help with the cost on an HC1 form, which you can get from a JobCentrePlus office or staff at the hospital. You can also request a form by telephoning **0845 850 1166**. After that the full cost or part of the cost may be covered by the NHS.

Other financial help may also be available. You may be able to apply for grants and benefits from other organisations or charities. We give one-off grants to people with cancer, and these can be used towards the cost of a wig. You need to apply through a health or social care professional, such as a district nurse, social worker or a Macmillan nurse if you have one. You can speak to our cancer support specialists on **0808 808 00 00** to find out more about Macmillan grants, and find out what other benefits you might be entitled to.

You are entitled to a new wig (paid for by the NHS) every six months if necessary. Human hair wigs cannot be prescribed on the NHS unless you are allergic to acrylic wigs or have a skin condition that may be made worse by an acrylic wig.

Buying a wig privately

Some people can afford to buy a wig privately. It may be possible then to get one that looks more natural and it may also suit their hair style and texture better.

If you want to buy a wig or hairpiece privately, you can get them from:

- wig departments in department stores – but remember that not all wig departments have a private area where you can try a wig on, so you may want to check this out first
- a wig manufacturer directly
- a specialist wig shop.

'The worst thing about losing your hair after chemo is when it starts growing back. It was all different lengths and I felt really uncomfortable letting anyone see it. The wigs on offer through the NHS weren't right for my ethnicity so I had to buy my own. I've got a collection, short, mid and longer length, and really enjoy wearing them. I view them as an advantage as I can change my appearance when I like, they keep my head warm in the winter!'

Woman who had hair loss

VAT (Value Added Tax) does not have to be paid on wigs when hair loss is caused by cancer treatment. You will need to fill in a VAT form, which most shops will give to you at the time you buy the wig. The tax cannot be claimed back at a later date.

More information and support

If you have any questions about cancer, ask Macmillan. If you need support, ask Macmillan. Or if you just want someone to talk to, ask Macmillan.

Our cancer support specialists are here for everyone living with cancer, whatever you need.

Call free on 0808 808 00 00, Monday–Friday, 9am–8pm

www.macmillan.org.uk

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