

What is chemotherapy-related alopecia?

Chemotherapy-related alopecia is hair loss caused by chemotherapy. Not every type of chemotherapy causes hair loss. Chemotherapy attacks fast growing cells. Cancer cells are fast growing and so are the cells that grow your hair. Hair can fall out all at once, in patches or slowly.

How much hair loss and how long it takes to grow back depends on:

- The type of drug
- The dose of drug
- Length of treatment
- Personal factors

Hair loss is usually temporary. It may start 1-3 weeks after the first treatment and may start to grow back 6-8 weeks after the last treatment. Hair that grows back may be of a slightly different colour or texture. The new hair may be finer or coarser, lighter or darker, straight or curly. These changes are usually temporary. It may take one year or longer before hair completely grows back and returns to its original state.

What can I do about my hair loss?

1. Make changes to how you care for your hair

Try these tips when washing and drying your hair:

- Wash the hair on your head less often once it starts to fall out
- Use a mild protein shampoo twice a week and massage the scalp
- Use a soft hair brush and a hair dryer set on low heat or let your hair dry naturally
- For long or medium-length hair, get a shorter cut to make hair look fuller and thicker

Try to avoid the following:

- Avoid rubbing your hair dry and instead pat your hair
- Avoid curling irons, straightening irons and hot rollers
- Avoid perms, hair colour, bleach, peroxide ammonia and lacquer during treatment
- Talk to your healthcare team about when it is okay to use these products again

2. Protect your scalp

Protect your scalp from the sun when outdoors.

These tips can help you protect your scalp:

- Wear a wide-brimmed hat or scarf
- Use a broad-spectrum sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 30
- Wear a hat or scarf in cold weather to reduce the loss of body heat
- Use a satin or satin-like pillowcase. This will prevent pulling on your hair while you sleep

3. Find support

Support from family, friends and your community can make you feel better.

These tips can help you get support:

- Talk to someone you trust and who is a good listener
- Join a cancer support program to share stories with other people
- Talk to others who have experienced hair loss
- Attend the “Look Good, Feel Better” program at Wellspring for help with wigs, scarves, skin care and makeup. There is no fee for the 2-hour workshop where you will learn simple cosmetic tips and gain confidence through the support from other women

4. Choose a head covering

There are many different services that provide head coverings for those who have hair loss.

Contact one of these programs to find a head covering:

- Hats of Hope Room → on the first floor of the Walker Family Cancer Centre, we have head covers for both men and women free of charge. We have: wigs, fedoras, winter hats, sleep caps, turbans, bandanas, scarves and skull caps
- Canadian Cancer Society → the Canadian Cancer Society has wig rooms in many community offices (67 Ontario Street, St. Catharines) where women can look at real-hair wigs and try them on to see if there is a wig that suits them
- Transitions Studio → Carlo’s studio (244 Grantham Avenue, St. Catharines) has services that are fresh and chemical-free. Some services they offer are: natural looking wigs, facial treatments, ammonia free hair colours and hair design

The Walker Family Cancer Centre does not endorse or recommend any particular organization, individual, product, or service, nor can we assure the quality of the work of any organization or individual.

Check your personal health insurance information for wig coverage and ask your nurse for a “wig form”.