



Alopecia Areata

Alopecia areata is a form of hair loss (alopecia) that is common, particularly in children. This condition is auto-immune; the immune system, that part of the body that fights infection, becomes misdirected and attacks the hair. The reason this happens is not known.

Usually, hair falls out by the roots in a 1-3 inch area of the scalp. Sometimes, there is more than one area affected, and these can be different sizes. The skin in the affected areas of hair loss is normal, without significant scaling, crusting, or redness. Most often, the hair regrows without treatment, sometimes even as new patches appear. Generally, the hair eventually regrows in all areas.

Occasionally, other areas of hair can be affected, including the eyebrows, eyelashes, beard area in adults, and even under the arms or in pubic hair.

This is not a dangerous condition, and is not associated with cancer, diabetes, heart disease, or other medically serious diseases. There is a slightly increased risk for vitiligo (white areas of the skin) or thyroid problems, primarily in adults. Replacing the thyroid hormone does not regrow hair in areas of alopecia areata.

There is no cure for alopecia areata, but a cure is generally not needed as the hair regrows without treatment in most people. Cortisones by mouth and injections regrow hair temporarily, and some providers believe that these cortisones may help to "jumpstart" hair into regrowing in the affected areas permanently. Cortisones do not prevent future hair loss. Many clinicians also use topical cortisone creams, tacrolimus ointment (Protopic®), pimecrolimus cream (Elidel®) and over-the-counter minoxidil solution or foam (Rogaine®). There are very, very few good research trials on the treatment of alopecia areata. The fact that hair usually regrows on its own makes an evaluation of the success of medications difficult.

Another, more complicated treatment is the application of medications (diphenylcyclopropenone and dinitrochlorobenzene) that cause a skin allergy with crusting and weeping, sometimes resulting in hair regrowth.

The National Alopecia Areata Foundation is a good clearinghouse for information on the management of alopecia areata (<https://www.naaf.org/>). However, this website shows photographs primarily of the very small proportion of individuals with alopecia areata who have widespread hair loss.