

Female Pattern Hair Loss

What is female pattern hair loss?

Female pattern hair loss refers to central hair thinning and decreased hair density that occurs after puberty. It is the female equivalent of male pattern balding or androgenetic alopecia.

What causes female pattern hair loss?

The cause of female pattern hair loss is not well understood. Most women do not have an excess of male hormones (androgens) but the hair follicle may be more sensitive to normal levels of hormone. This increased sensitivity may be inherited. Decreasing oestrogen levels may also play a role.

Is female pattern hair loss hereditary?

A family history of hair loss is common which may support inheritance. The genetics of female pattern hair loss though remain unclear.

What are the symptoms?

Most women become aware of hair thinning on the top of the head which may reveal the scalp that was previously obscured by denser hair coverage. There may be increased shedding of hair but this can be due to another co-existing problem if the shedding involves the entire scalp.

What does female pattern hair loss look like?

Hair thinning is most noticeable on the top of the scalp (vertex). The central parting may become wider. The density of hair decreases and individual hairs become finer. Over time, hair no longer covers the scalp and the scalp becomes more visible. The frontal hairline is often preserved.

Can it be cured?

Whilst there are a number of treatments that can slow the process or partially reverse it, complete reversal to pre-puberty density is not achievable with medical treatments.

How can female pattern hair loss be treated?

Female pattern hair loss can be treated with solutions applied to the scalp, tablet treatments aimed at decreasing male hormones, or camouflage treatments aimed at disguising the scalp. Hair transplantation can also improve hair density.

Minoxidil solution

This is often the main stay of treatment in female pattern hair loss. It is available over the counter and is licensed at the 2% strength for use in woman. Higher doses (e.g. 5%) are not licensed in woman but have been used extensively and may offer further benefit. The lotion should be applied twice daily to the scalp. Treatment is long term.

Combined oral contraceptive pills.

Certain contraceptive pills, which contain oestrogens and non-harmful progesterones can be useful in female pattern hair loss. It is important that your hair loss concerns are discussed with your general practitioner so that the appropriate pill is chosen. Progesterone only pills, implants, depot injections and progesterone containing intra-uterine devices should be avoided unless no other contraceptive is available.

Cyproterone Acetate

This can be combined with a contraceptive pill for additional benefit.

Spirinolactone

High doses spironolactone, a blood pressure medication, can be useful in female pattern hair loss, but requires regular blood tests.

5 α reductase inhibitors

These medications are anti-androgens and are licensed in men with prostate disease. Experts sometimes use them off license, in an experimental fashion, but strict monitoring is required.

What if I need a wig?

Some individuals with female pattern hair loss will prefer to wear a wig rather than pursue active treatment. These can either be bought privately or obtained through the NHS (although a financial contribution is required) with a consultant's prescription.

What can I do?

- Join a hair loss support group.
- Seek unbiased medical help and be sceptical of the latest online solution.
- Try active treatment for a minimum of 12 months.
- Use camouflage techniques to disguise the problem.

