

Low Dose Oral Minoxidil for Hair Loss

What is low dose oral minoxidil?

Minoxidil is a treatment that was developed for blood pressure treatment that works by dilating blood vessels. It was found to have the side effect of causing excess hair growth. It was not a particularly reliable blood pressure treatment and at normal doses of 10-40mg could cause significant side effects. Much lower doses, typically 1.25mg to 5mg, have been used as a treatment for hair loss. It does not have a specific license for this indication and therefore is prescribed "off license" under specialist care only.

What is it used for?

The commonest use of low dose oral minoxidil (LDOM) is genetic or pattern hair loss. It is used as an alternative to topical minoxidil lotion or foam or in addition to anti-androgens (finasteride) and low level laser light. It can also be used in chronic hair shedding conditions like Telogen Effluvium. It has also been used as an adjunctive treatment in scarring hair loss, such as Lichen Planopilaris and Frontal Fibrosing Alopecia. It does not cause new hairs to grow in areas of scarring but can thicken existing hairs to disguise the loss and may have some modulatory effect on the condition.

What doses are used?

The normal doses in women are 1.25-2.5mg, which often means splitting a 2.5mg tablet. Men may need a slightly higher dose of 2.5-5mg. Higher doses are associated with more side effects and there is evidence that much smaller doses can be just as effective.

What are the benefits of LDOM over topical minoxidil?

Topical minoxidil can cause some irritation or dryness of the scalp. It takes time to apply and is only designed to be used on the top of the head, so is less suitable for more widespread thinning or in generalised shedding conditions. Topical minoxidil may alter the feel or texture of the hair. There will also be some patients who do not respond to topical minoxidil who may benefit from oral minoxidil due to the way the drug is metabolised to its active form in the liver.

How effective is LDOM and how does it compare to topical Minoxidil?

Around 70% of patients will respond to LDOM in terms of less hair fall/shedding and over 9-12 months a modest thickening may be appreciated (10-20%). There are few studies comparing oral to topical minoxidil but 1mg is at least equivalent to 5% topical minoxidil.

What the side effects of LDOM?

There are a number of potential side effects that can limit its use and these are experienced by 1 in 5 patients with 1 in 50 having to stop the treatment. These include a racing heart (tachycardia) lightheadedness, headache, palpitations, swelling around the eye, leg swelling, insomnia, hair shedding (usually temporary in first six weeks) and unwanted hair at other sites eg face.

How do I treat unwanted hair or manage other side effects?

The majority of people who experience side effects can continue treatment. Sometimes a dose reduction is necessary eg reducing from 2.5mg to 1.25mg. Alternatively, the medication can be given less frequently, eg alternate days. Facial hair can be treated with laser hair removal devices, threading, plucking or shaving. It is best to limit other stimulants that may make the heart race (eg caffeine) or lower the blood pressure (alcohol, blood pressure medications).

