

Hair Loss in Women

Hair loss can be upsetting. The good news is that in many cases, we can find a cause and take steps to help your hair grow back. This handout explains some common reasons for hair loss in women and what you and your doctor can do about it.

Why might I be losing hair on my scalp?

- Female pattern hair loss – a gradual thinning of hair over the top of the scalp, often with a widening part.
- Telogen effluvium – a shedding of hair, often after major stress such as pregnancy, illness, or surgery.
- Low iron – iron helps carry oxygen to your cells, including hair follicles.
- Low vitamin D – vitamin D supports healthy hair growth.
- High male hormones (hyperandrogen state) – can cause excess shedding or thinning, sometimes along with acne or irregular periods.
- Alopecia areata – patchy hair loss caused by the immune system attacking hair follicles.
- Other causes: thyroid problems, scalp infections, or tight hairstyles.

How is hair loss diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will:

- Ask about health history, recent stress, and hair care habits.
- Examine the scalp and hair.
- Order blood tests to check for iron (ferritin), vitamin D, thyroid, or hormone problems.

What if my doctor tells me I have low iron?

- Low iron can make hair loss worse.
- Doctors usually want your ferritin (iron storage) level above 40.
- To help raise it, you can take ferrous sulfate 325 mg once a day (available without a prescription).
- Take with the biggest meal of the day.
- If the iron causes stomach upset or constipation, let your doctor know.

What if my doctor tells me I have low vitamin D?

- We want your vitamin D to be in the normal range.
- You can take vitamin D 2,000 international units (IU) once daily (available without a prescription).

What if my doctor tells me my hormone levels are off?

- If your hormone levels show either elevated male hormones or thyroid issues, your doctor will likely refer you to an endocrinologist (a hormone specialist) for further care.

What if my hair loss was caused by stress?

- Hair loss can follow physical stress (such as pregnancy and delivery, a car accident, a serious illness, or hospitalization) or emotional stress (such as anxiety or depression).
- The good news: once the stress is over, the hair usually grows back in 3 to 6 months.

What treatments are available?

Minoxidil (Rogaine®)

- You can use topical minoxidil 5% foam (available without a prescription). Apply once daily to your scalp.
- Important safety tip: Minoxidil is toxic to pets (especially cats and dogs).
- Keep it in its container, away from animals.
- Don't let pets lick your skin where you applied it.
- Don't let your pet sleep on your pillow, as it may cause transfer of the medication.

Lifestyle / Non-pharmacologic Approaches

- Eat a healthy diet: target at least 3 fruits and 2 servings of vegetables per day.
- Make sure you get enough protein and whole grains.
- Avoid tight hairstyles that pull on the scalp.
- Be gentle with hair care (limit heat, harsh chemicals, and frequent tight ponytails/braids).
- Manage stress, since stress can worsen hair shedding.
- There are many supplements and vitamin products being sold without any clinical studies proving they work. Don't waste your money.

What should be expected with treatment?

- Hair regrowth is slow. It may take 6–12 months to see improvement, and not everyone will have full regrowth.
- Early treatment gives the best chance for success.
- Ongoing treatment is usually needed to maintain results.
- Hair loss can affect mood and self-confidence. Support groups or counseling may help.

Key points to remember

- Hair loss in women is common and often treatable.
- The most common cause is female pattern hair loss, but other causes should be checked.
- Topical minoxidil is the main treatment for most women.
- Correcting low iron or vitamin D, gentle hair care, and reducing stress may also help.
- Protect your pets if using minoxidil.
- Results take time, so be patient.