

Patient Information Leaflet: Alopecia Areata

What is Alopecia Areata?

Alopecia areata is an autoimmune condition characterised by sudden hair loss that typically occurs in round patches on the scalp and other areas of the body. It can affect anyone regardless of age, gender, or ethnicity. While the exact cause of alopecia areata is not fully understood, it occurs when the immune system mistakenly attacks hair follicles, leading to hair loss.

Types of Alopecia Areata:

1. **Alopecia Areata:** The most common form, resulting in one or more round patches of hair loss on the scalp or elsewhere on the body.
2. **Alopecia Totalis:** Total loss of hair on the scalp.
3. **Alopecia Universalis:** Total loss of hair on the scalp and body, including eyebrows and eyelashes.
4. **Diffuse Alopecia Areata:** A less common form that causes widespread thinning of hair across the scalp.

Causes and Triggers:

The exact cause of alopecia areata is unknown, but several factors may contribute to its onset, including:

- **Genetic Factors:** Most patients have genes that lead to a susceptibility that alopecia can develop at some point in their lives. A family history of alopecia areata or other autoimmune conditions is often a sign of underlying genetic susceptibility.
- **Autoimmune Response:** The immune system attacks hair follicles, leading to hair loss.
- **Environmental Triggers:** Stress, infections, or other factors may trigger the onset of the condition in genetically predisposed individuals.

Symptoms:

Common symptoms of alopecia areata include:

- Sudden hair loss in one or more round patches on the scalp or body.
- Changes in the texture or colour of hair in the affected areas.
- Possible tingling or itching in the area before hair loss occurs.
- In some cases, the nails may show pitting or ridges.

Diagnosis:

Alopecia areata is usually diagnosed through a physical examination of the affected areas by a dermatologist. They may also conduct a thorough medical history and, if necessary, a scalp biopsy to rule out other causes of hair loss.



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Treatment Options:

Currently, there is no cure for alopecia areata, but several treatment options can help manage the condition and promote hair regrowth:

1. **Topical Corticosteroids:**
 - These anti-inflammatory creams, ointments, lotions or gels are often the first-line treatment for mild cases, helping to reduce inflammation and stimulate hair regrowth.
2. **Intralesional Corticosteroid Injections:**
 - Corticosteroid injections directly into the bald patches may promote hair growth, especially for more localised areas of hair loss.
3. **Topical Immunotherapy:**
 - This treatment involves applying a chemical solution to the scalp that triggers an allergic reaction, stimulating the immune response and potentially promoting hair regrowth.
4. **Oral Medications:**
 - In more severe cases or those that are resistant to other treatments, oral medications such as corticosteroids or immunosuppressants such as ciclosporin, azathioprine or methotrexate may be prescribed.
5. **JAK Inhibitors:**
 - This new class of medication includes Baricitinib, Ritlecitinib and Deuruxolitinib. They interfere with the autoimmune signalling pathway between your immune cells and the hair follicle cells that they are attacking. This leads to more effective and tolerated immunosuppression and hair regrowth in the majority of patients with severe alopecia areata.
6. **Light Therapy (Phototherapy):**
 - This treatment uses ultraviolet light to stimulate hair follicles and promote growth.

Self-Care and Lifestyle Tips:

- **Gentle Hair Care:** Use mild shampoos and avoid harsh chemical treatments to prevent additional irritation.
- **Manage Stress:** Engage in stress-reduction techniques such as yoga, meditation, or exercise, as stress may trigger or worsen hair loss.
- **Wigs and Hairpieces:** Consider options such as wigs, hats, or scarves for cosmetic concerns and psychological comfort.

When to Seek Medical Advice:

- If you notice sudden hair loss or patches on your scalp or body.
- If you experience pain, swelling, or redness in the areas of hair loss.
- If you have questions about treatment options or if existing treatments are not effective.

Conclusion:

Alopecia areata is a manageable condition, and with the right treatment and support, many individuals can experience hair regrowth and regain confidence. Understanding the nature of alopecia areata and knowing your treatment options can help in managing the condition effectively.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding alopecia areata or your treatment options, please consult your dermatologist for further guidance.

