

Alopecia Areata

Alopecia areata (AA) is a disease that affects growing hair. While it does not cause any harm to general health, the loss of hair it causes can be troubling.

In its onset, AA may manifest itself as a small area of loose hair. In some cases, it progresses rapidly with several areas losing hair. This is particularly a problem when it affects scalp hair, but it can also involve any body area where hair grows, including the face, eyelids, body and pubic region. AA can also cause changes in the fingernails and toenails, such as stippling or grooving.

The cause of AA is unknown, but it is believed to be an auto-immune disease. By this, we mean that some change occurs that causes the body to attack and destroy the hair with its natural immune defenses. AA may have a genetic link, and in about 20 percent of patients there is a known family history, sometimes spanning several generations.

AA is unpredictable by nature. One case may be acute and short-lived, while another will be chronic with re-growth in some areas and progression to new sites for years. However, regardless of the course AA takes, hair re-growth always remains a possibility. Even those who have experienced severe scalp hair loss may suddenly re-grow all of their hair.

AA may be treated with drugs that affect the immune system, such as DNCB, PUVA, topical corticosteroids and Minoxidil. Systemic corticosteroids (cortisone) may be used but usually their side effects preclude long-term use.

For more information, contact the National Alopecia Areata Foundation at 741 Capital C Street, San Rafael, CA, 94901.

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