

## The Bare Facts

- Alopecia areata is a condition where the body's immune system attacks hair follicles, causing them to turn off and shed their hair. There is a genetic susceptibility to being affected by this condition.
- Hair loss can occur in patches, or be more extensive to involve all the body's hair.
- Most people regrow hair spontaneously; treatments are effective in encouraging regrowth.
- Treatment can include steroids, irritant and immune therapy, all of which attempt to alter the body's abnormal immune response to the hair follicles. Lotions which are usually used to encourage hair growth common baldness can also be used.



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## Where to find Help

Your local doctor should be your first point of call for any problems. He or she will be able to monitor the progress of your treatment and to refer you to the appropriate specialist for treatment.

The Alopecia Areata Support Association (Vic) Inc. has regular meetings, various literature and brochures as well as a bi-monthly newsletter. Their address is:

P.O. Box 89  
Camberwell  
VIC 3124

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[www alopecia.auz.com](http://www alopecia.auz.com)

More information can also be found on the website of the Australian Hair and Wool Research Society:

[www alopecia.com.au](http://www alopecia.com.au)

The Australasian Hair and Wool Research Society  
Department of Dermatology  
St. Vincent's Hospital  
41 Victoria Parade  
Fitzroy VIC 3065

The Skin and Cancer Foundation (VIC)  
95 Rathdowne Street  
Carlton VIC 3053

Understanding

# Alopecia Areata



## Definition

Alopecia areata is a condition where hair loss usually occurs suddenly in round patches. In contrast to male pattern baldness, the areas of hair loss are random and can occur on other parts of the body as well as the scalp. In a small number of people, all the scalp and body hair may be lost. Alopecia areata can affect men, women and children. Why it develops is not known, but many cases resolve spontaneously and most of the remainder can be effectively treated.

## The Hair Cycle

In order to understand how alopecia areata affects hair growth it is important to understand how hair grows. Under normal circumstances each hair follicle on your scalp produces a number of hairs throughout your life. Hair grows from the base of the follicle at the rate of about 1 cm a month for about three years. The growth phase is called anagen. After that time that hair will die and no longer grow and simply sit dormant in the follicle for a three month phase called telogen. After that three month telogen phase the next anagen phase starts and hair grows out from the follicle. As it grows, it pushes the old telogen hair out. This is a cycle that continues throughout life.

## The Immune System

Alopecia areata affects genetically susceptible people when the body's immune system attacks the hair bulb whilst in the anagen growth phase. This misdirected immune attack prevents growth of healthy anagen hairs and pushes the affected hair follicles into a dormant telogen state. As the hair follicles are "turned off", but the hair bulb is not destroyed, there is always a chance for recovery or regrowth. This is much in the same way that daffodils can grow each spring providing a bulb remains in

the ground.

Alopecia Areata may recover by itself. Even without any treatment one third of the people affected by alopecia areata will have completely regrown their hair within six months and half the people within one year.

## Treatment

The aim of treatment is to stimulate hair regrowth in the bald patches. There is no treatment that will alter your genetic susceptibility to develop new patches of alopecia areata in the future.

In most instances, AA is treated with cortisone which suppresses normal as well as abnormal immune responses. For this reason cortisone tablets are only used for extensive, rapidly progressive or resistant alopecia areata.

Although cortisone is often successful, it does not work for or suit everyone and some people have hair loss when they are stopped.

Alternatives to steroids include topical irritant or immunotherapy. These treatments involve a mildly irritating cream or lotion being applied directly to the scalp. This diverts immune attack up to the skin surface and away from the hair bulb. The reaction is usually mild, although severe reactions or discomfort can sometimes occur. These treatments will usually need to be used for several months to achieve regrowth and do not work for everyone. Commonly used irritants include Dithranol and Salicylic acid and commonly used immunotherapy agents include Diphenylcyclopropenone (DPCP) and Dinitrochlorobenzene (DNCB)

Another treatment that can be used is PUVA Therapy which requires visits to the doctor's surgery 3 times per week for treatment with ultraviolet light.

Topical Minoxidil is a lotion applied to the scalp twice a day. It is mainly used to treat common baldness but may also be effective in some people with alopecia areata. Its mechanism of action is unknown.

## Treatment Resistant Alopecia Areata

Some people may have either extensive hair loss or hair loss that persists for many years and is not helped by any of these treatments. They may go for long periods without hair. If you fall into this category it may be worthwhile obtaining a wig or experimenting with scarves and make-up so as to camouflage the problem and minimise the impact on your day to day activities.

The Alopecia Areata Society provide excellent support and publishes a regular newsletter. They also conduct seminars for sufferers of alopecia areata and their families. We recommend you contact this organisation if you are having difficulties coming to terms with the disorder or are seeking further information about alopecia areata or advice regarding wigs and camouflage.

