WHY ARE WE LOSING IT?

It isn't just men who face being follicularly challenged. Here, the uncut truth on hair loss

That moment. That precise moment when someone points out your lack of crowning glory is torture. I was 15, trussed up in a Wonderbra and a cloud of L'Eau d'Issey, convinced this was the moment I'd finally get a smooch with Robert Jones, the fitty of Year 11. He leaned in close and whispered the words I'll never forget, "You’re going bald." Ouch.

I still remember standing in front of the mirror that evening, obsessively checking the visible scalp gleaming back at me. It would be three years before I discovered this thinning hair was linked to polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), a hormonal condition, associated with symptoms including obesity, acne and, in my case, male-pattern hair loss.

One thing’s changed, though. Back then, I felt alone and crushingly unattractive. Pretty girls had good hair. Shiny, shampoo-advert locks are so entwined with our ideas of beauty and femininity that to lose them felt like the ultimate betrayal. Now, I'm 30 and still struggling, but, I'm in better company. Recently, when I asked the WH team who'd like to try hair-thickening products, a handful of people came forward, two confessing they shared my struggle.

Maybe it's because I'm hyper aware of it, but I see more and more women, like me, on the bus or in a bar, with hair that’s become far from glorious. Officially, eight million women in the UK will suffer from hair loss (medically known as alopecia) at some point.
A vital key for hair growth is creating an ideal environment for it to thrive in. Aveda Healthy Hair Clinic can help. Advanced creative director Michael Lendle says they use a Camera with 600% magnification. “It focuses on your scalp health and tells if the root zone from your hair is affected.” PS: It’s free.

By Friedmann. It feels almost trite to suggest it, but from brisk walks to meditation, stress relief works differently for different people. It’s a case of finding out your own chill pill. *This is equally as important if, like me and the other one in 10 women who suffer from it, your hair issues are linked to PCOS. This takes us back to cortisol again. It makes our cells become less sensitive to insulin, so we need to produce more for it to do its blood-sugar levelling job. Insulin also acts upon the ovaries to produce testosterone (it’s normal for women to produce some) but the more insulin we release, the more testosterone we’re pumping out.* Hello, hair loss.

As a more direct method of hormone regulation, your GP could put you on the Pill. “An Australian study found you can suppress testosterone in women and allow some hair regrowth using certain forms of the Pill, says Dr Gerard Conway, endocrinologist at University College London. Though there’s no miracle cure to hair loss, what we do know is that time is the game-changer. It may take some significant lifestyle changes and up to six months to see any kind of regrowth. Take a before picture at the start of your trial, and one for each consecutive month after. “Changes in hair growth are small, but have a cumulative effect. Keeping a record will show you progress.”

L’Oreal Elvive Fibrology Thickening Shampoo, £2.99.

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Smirking, he says, referring to this misleading ‘tired’ but wired stress-circuit we’ve been sucked into. Multitasking as standard. Juggling work, family and FOMO (why else would you end up at hip-hop karaoke on a Tuesday night?). “It all results in chronic stress,” says Friedmann. “Our cortisol and adrenaline levels are elevated more often and for longer.” Cortisol leaches nutrients from your system, sending them away from places such as hair, to vital organs. But that’s only the beginning of a complex hormonal chain that can result in different types of hair loss. “Hair grows and then reaches a resting phase where it will eventually shed, and new hair will grow – that’s normal,” says Friedmann. “But in the case of telogen effluvium type hair loss, stress hormones called neuropeptides push hairs out of the growing phase into the resting phase – slowing regrowth to the point thinning hair becomes obvious.”

Chronic stress can also be a contributing factor to alopecia areata – circular patches of hair loss – which occur when your immune system turns on itself, often due to your adrenal glands firing off high levels of cortisol and adrenaline. What’s the answer? Well, if you were to go to your GP, not much. “This is part of the problem,” says trichologist Glenn Lyons. “It’s so traumatic for women who are suffering from it, but as far as the NHS is concerned, it’s not high up on the agenda.” In fact, the most proven treatment – a lotion called Minoxidil, which helps keep follicles in their growing phase – is only available privately. There’s hope, though. “There are lifestyle changes you can make,” advises hormone specialist Dr Marilyn Glenville. “You can look at bolstering the nutrients most affected by stress. We know B vitamins – particularly B5 – are heavily associated with hair and stress, so up your intake. Try eating more dark green leafy veg, nuts and seeds. Along with wholegrains, these are also a great source of magnesium, which has been shown to aid hair growth.” It can be a case of learning how to deal with your stress. “Stress-related hair loss is particularly common with types who implode rather than explode,” explains Friedmann. “It’s a case of learning how to deal with your stress. It can be a case of learning how to deal with your stress.”

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