

ALOPECIA AREATA

What causes alopecia areata?

Alopecia areata is the most common cause of discrete hair loss without scale. Bald areas of different sizes can happen anywhere the body makes hair, but it is most common to see this on the scalp. About one out of a thousand people has alopecia areata. The first episode often occurs in childhood or the early adult years. The cause of alopecia areata is unknown, but the science suggests that it is an "auto immune" process, where the body's infection fighting cells mistakenly attack hair bulbs, the site of hair growth. A small number of cases of alopecia areata have been associated with autoimmune disorders of the thyroid, red blood cells, and other endocrine glands. Almost all children and adolescents, however, are healthy except for the hair problem. 10% to 20% of patients have a family history of alopecia areata. Some children will have small dots on the nails called "nail pitting".



What happens to the hair?

The course of alopecia areata is unpredictable. Some people will develop only a few small patches, which resolve in several months. A small minority (less than 10%) of patients will progress to lose all scalp or body hair. If only a few patches develop, 95% of children and adolescents will have complete hair re-growth within a year. Involvement of the lower scalp near the neck or ears has a somewhat poorer prognosis, as does more extensive involvement. However, even children with complete hair loss may eventually develop good re-growth.



What can be done to make the hair grow back?

The mainstay of therapy in young children is to use a topical steroid called "clobetasol". This is usually used twice a day for 1 month, with a break of 1 month, before starting again. If there is a lot of hair loss, a special liquid (DPCP) can be "painted" on the scalp every week. It can take 3 to 4 months before seeing any result. If these do not work, or if the patient is older, injections with a small needle can be done every 1-2 months. It is important to note that when the hair grows back, it sometimes starts off white before picking up the regular hair colour.

