

What is alopecia areata?

Alopecia areata is a condition that causes hair loss. It usually shows up as round patches on the scalp. Alopecia areata is one of the most common causes of hair loss in children.

About 1 in 50 people will experience alopecia areata in their lifetime. In most people, hair eventually grows back, although this process can take months or years.

WHAT CAUSES ALOPECIA AREATA?

Alopecia areata is an autoimmune condition. It is caused by the immune system attacking the hair.

The immune system normally fights against germs. In patients with alopecia areata, the immune system attacks the hair. This causes hair to fall out. It is not clear what triggers the immune system to start mistakenly fighting the hair.

WHAT TESTS ARE NEEDED IN ALOPECIA AREATA?

Usually, doctors can diagnose alopecia areata by looking at the areas of hair loss. Sometimes they might do a special test called a biopsy, where they take a small piece of skin from the scalp to look at under a microscope.

Most children with alopecia areata are otherwise healthy. Some children with alopecia may also need testing of their thyroid. Your doctor may order some blood tests if needed.

WHAT CAN I EXPECT FROM TREATMENT OF ALOPECIA AREATA?

There is no cure for alopecia areata, but there are treatments that can help. Treatment options may include:

- » **No treatment:** Some kids' hair grows back on its own without any treatment. In milder cases, you and your doctor may choose to wait to see if the hair grows back on its own.
- » **Topical steroids:** These include creams and solutions that are applied to the scalp. The goal is to lower the inflammation in the scalp so the hair can grow back.
- » **Steroid injections:** Steroids can be injected into the scalp to lower the inflammation under the skin of the scalp. These injections are painful but are an option for older children and teens who want to try them.
- » **Contact sensitizers:** These medications, like squaric acid or "DPCP" are applied to the scalp. These can work by changing how the immune system focuses on the scalp.

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF ALOPECIA AREATA?

There are three common forms of alopecia areata. The type depends on how much hair is lost:

- » **ALOPECIA AREATA:** round patches of hair loss. This is the most common type and can occur anywhere on the body that has hair.
- » **ALOPECIA TOTALIS:** loss of all hair on the scalp.
- » **ALOPECIA UNIVERSALIS:** loss of all scalp and body hair.

- » **Minoxidil:** Topical or oral minoxidil helps increase blood flow to the scalp, which can promote hair growth. These can keep hairs in the growing phase longer.
- » **JAK inhibitors:** JAK inhibitors work by lowering the immune system to help stop the attack on the hair. For milder cases, JAK inhibitor creams may be tried. For more severe alopecia, JAK inhibitors can be taken by mouth.
- » **Other:** Other off-label therapies are sometimes also recommended. These are sometimes considered in patients who do not respond to other treatments.

Each of these treatments can be helpful in some patients. Not all children with alopecia will respond to therapy. If a treatment does work, it typically must be continued to treat new patches of hair loss.

HOW CAN I HELP SUPPORT MY CHILD WITH ALOPECIA AREATA?

Supporting your child is very important. Some children may feel sad or worried about their hair loss. Other children may feel completely differently. Listen to your child.

Encourage your child to talk about their feelings. Let them know that you're there to support and help. It is important that your child has someone that they trust and can talk to. This person can be a friend, family member, or counselor.

Talk with your child about what they want to share with friends and classmates. If appropriate, speak with your child's teacher or principal, or share the [Alopecia Handout for School Nurses & Educators](#).

Children and adults may be curious about your child's alopecia. You can help your child learn what to say if someone asks about their hair loss, or if it is contagious or a sign of cancer. Practicing a response can help children handle questions more easily. They can give a simple answer like "I have alopecia" or anything else they are comfortable responding with. You and your child can explain that it is not contagious nor a sign of cancer.

Some children may choose to cover their hair loss with hats, scarves, or wigs. Others may choose not to.

You may give your child the choice to interact with other children who have alopecia through support groups. This allows them to share their experiences and know they are not alone.

WHAT OTHER RESOURCES ARE THERE FOR FAMILIES?

There are several resources to provide support and education for families with alopecia:

>> National Alopecia Areata Foundation

Website: www.naaf.org
Email: info@naaf.org

>> The Childrens Alopecia Project

www.childrensalopeciaproject.org

>> National Library of Medicine Research Database

Past and current research studies can be found at www.clinicaltrials.gov



The Society for Pediatric Dermatology
8365 Keystone Crossing, Suite 107
Indianapolis, IN 46240
(317) 202-0224
www.pedsderm.net

Author:
Lacey Kruse, MD
Reviewer:
Leslie Castelo-Soccio, MD, PhD

The Society for Pediatric Dermatology and Wiley Publishing cannot be held responsible for any errors or for any consequences arising from the use of the information contained in this handout. Handout originally published in *Pediatric Dermatology*; Vol. 33, No. 6 (2016). Handout revised (2024).

© 2024 The Society for Pediatric Dermatology