

Male pattern baldness

What do we mean by baldness?

Baldness is slow painless hair loss that follows a distinctive pattern with increasing age. In most instances it is a natural process and in men it tends to run in the family. It is called *androgenetic alopecia*. Normally about 100 hairs on the scalp are shed every day and the hair is replaced about every 4 years. Approximately 60% of men have significant hair loss by 50 years of age.

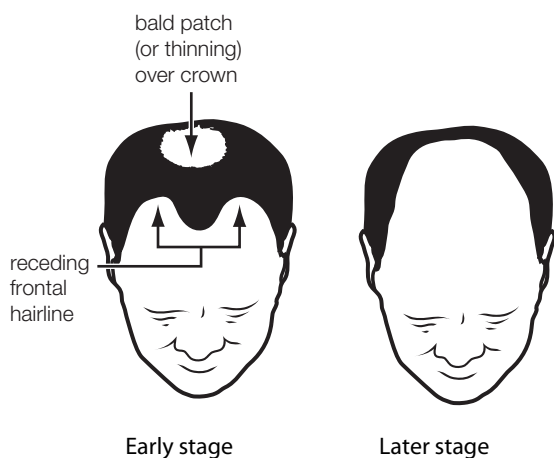
What is the pattern?

The normal pattern is for the front hairline to recede first in the temple and frontal areas while the hair thins over the crown (back top of head). This situation may remain for the rest of a man's life but in many these frontal and top areas eventually meet and continue while the whole scalp is affected. Some people experience short periods of considerable hair loss followed by a stable period of no loss. The earlier the hair loss begins, the greater the loss in the long run.

What is the cause?

Baldness is invariably a normal process that may follow a family tendency, indicating that genetic factors are important. Ageing is also a factor and hair thinning is inevitable in most people with advancing years. Hormones play an important part—men who are castrated when young don't go bald.

Rarely baldness is caused by a severe sudden illness in which hairs stop growing and then fall out in about 3 months. However, they will usually grow back. Certain illnesses such as thyroid disorders and iron-deficiency anaemia can cause diffuse hair loss. Some fungal scalp infections can result in bald patches.



Certain treatments, notably cytotoxic drugs (used to slow down cell growth in cancer), can cause loss of hair. It usually regrows when the drugs are stopped.

Some people are affected by a specific hair loss disorder called *alopecia*, which causes premature hair loss. It may occur as round bald patches (*alopecia areata*) but may spread to involve the whole scalp (*alopecia totalis*).

How common is baldness?

It is very common and each year 1 person in 300 consults a doctor about baldness, especially if it is unusual. Many others accept it and don't seek professional help.

What can be done?

Baldness is basically an incurable condition. Although it can be embarrassing and upsetting at first, most men are able to accept natural balding as part of the ageing process. Doctors generally encourage people to accept it. Cutting the hair very short does help and looks better than patches of straggly long hair.

If not acceptable, some options include wearing a toupee, a wig or other hair substitute or having a hair transplant operation. However, with hair transplantation the new hair is often just as likely to disappear as the original hair.

What about medications?

Medicated shampoos and ointments should not be used—they do not help. Do not get caught up with quick remedies. Neither vigorous brushing nor washing of the hair usually helps.

There are two drug treatments that can help, namely minoxidil lotion or gel which is applied directly to the scalp, and finasteride taken as tablets. However, it must be emphasised that these treatments are expensive, have variable results (good to no difference) and need to be taken for the rest of one's life if a response occurs. Hair loss usually resumes when treatment is stopped.

You can discuss the use of medications with your doctor.

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