

the modern management of hair loss

SYDNEY HAIR TRANSPLANT SURGEON **DR RUSSELL KNUDSEN** EXPLAINS THE OPTIONS AVAILABLE TO HELP REVERSE MALE PATTERN BALDING.

It is still very confusing to wade through the competing claims of various companies and technologies relating to hair loss in men. Unfortunately, it is a marketplace dominated by advertising rather than science. The cause of male pattern hair loss, by far the most common form of hair loss in men, is well understood by medical scientists, and treatment options have improved significantly in recent years.

Let's start with the myths: poor hygiene, poor diet and tight hats, among many other causes, have been variously blamed for male pattern balding. Even though this is complete nonsense and has been proved wrong for many years, many products and companies still promote 'remedies' based on 'correcting' these problems. Male pattern hair loss (balding) is a genetic condition, inherited from either side of the family (mothers or fathers, often both sides) that begins to be observed after puberty because of the influence of adult levels of male sex hormones.

The critical feature is that each and every hair follicle on the scalp is 'coded' for a certain amount of 5 alpha reductase enzyme activity. Curiously, in balding males, they inherit more of this enzyme in the upper scalp follicles than in the lower scalp follicles. This initiates a process of shrinking of the hair follicles in the upper scalp until, eventually, most are lost.

The crucial factor in the successful management of male pattern hair loss is early blocking of the enzyme. This is best achieved by a prescription medicine called Finasteride (another medicine, Dutasteride, is also effective). Medications such as these are much more effective in stopping or slowing down hair loss than they are in re-growing hair. Some patients with early thinning can successfully regrow stronger hairs but this occurs in only approximately one-third of these patients. By way of contrast, over 80 percent of patients who regularly use Finasteride will stop further hair thinning.

Prescription medicines such as Finasteride suffer from reports of possible sexual side effects. Let's clear up a few facts: these medications are not hormone-blockers, they are enzyme blockers. Side effects can occur but depend upon the dosage used. If you don't take the medicine every day (for example, three times a week) the risk of any side effects is dramatically lowered from 1 in 50 to 1 in 200. In other words, it is almost always possible to find an effective dose that doesn't cause side effects.

If you use this prescription medicine (any doctor can write the script) as your base medication, you can choose to add other treatment options if you desire. The next most successful is Minoxidil lotion which is a hair stimulant that can strengthen existing hair and slow down future loss. It is, however, not very effective if used alone. Although low power laser therapy has gained a lot of publicity and is a mild stimulant for hair, the evidence for its continuing effectiveness in balding is lacking. I have significant doubts about the effectiveness of hand-held laser devices because I don't believe that most users will apply the laser for long enough on the hairs to get any significant effect. A cap version of the laser that can be used at home may provide better effectiveness and will shortly be available.

☞ Treatment options for male pattern hair loss have improved significantly in recent years ☜

Herbal remedies and special shampoos and lotions should be viewed with considerable scepticism because there is no evidence that they have any effect.

Given that I have described the principle benefit of medication as slowing or stopping hair loss, then what can we do for the man with balding who wants some hair back? The simple answer is that to regain significant healthy hairs in the upper scalp, the only solution is a hair transplant.

Modern hair transplantation involves the transfer of tiny grafts containing one to three hairs (follicular unit grafts) from the healthy lower scalp to the balding area. As these hairs are coded to be 'non-balding' they survive in the bald areas and continue to grow healthy hairs. The use of natural hair groupings ensures a properly designed and executed hair transplant is undetectable. The unnatural appearance of older-style plug transplants is a thing of the past and they haven't been performed for at least 15 years.

The constant comment I get from men who undergo hair transplants is the boost to their self-confidence and the fact that their hairdresser doesn't know! It is also important to note that almost all of my hair transplant patients continue to use medication to prevent future hair loss. This reduces the possibility they might need further hair transplants in the future. **acsm**