

Patient Information Sheet

Hair loss and SACT

(Systemic Anti Cancer Therapy)



Hair Loss and SACT

Hair loss (alopecia) due to SACT can be one of the most distressing side effects.

How SACT affects your hair?

- SACT affects all the cells in your body- healthy cells and cancer cells. The cells in your hair follicles are very sensitive. When they are affected by SACT, they don't work quite as well as they should, resulting in hair loss.
- Not all SACT drugs cause hair loss. Some drugs don't cause any hair loss, some cause hair thinning, while others make hair fall out completely.
- Hair loss generally starts after the second dose of SACT. However, for some people it can occur as early as a few weeks after their first cycle of SACT.
- It is common for hair loss to include hair that grows anywhere on the body. This includes eyelashes, eyebrows, and pubic hair.
- Any hair loss that SACT causes is temporary, and once treatment is over, your hair will start to grow back. At first the hair is very fine, but you will probably have a full head after six months. You may find your new hair is curlier or coarser than it was before, or it may be a slightly different colour.

Practical Advice

- You may choose to have your hair cut into a shorter style before starting treatment. This can help ease the weight of your hair pulling on your scalp.
- Avoid using harsh chemicals and shampoo on your hair as these can cause the scalp to become dry and itchy. Try switching to milder products.

- Do not perm or colour your hair during and for at least six months after your treatment. Non-peroxide/ammonia hair colourants are better for fragile hair. Your hairdresser will be able to advise you. It may be better to have a patch test done before dying your hair.
- If your scalp does become too dry you can massage it with a light, un-perfumed moisturiser, i.e. diprobase.
- Use a soft hairbrush to prevent irritating your scalp if it is tender.
- Avoid nylon pillowcases as they can irritate the scalp. Use cotton as an alternative.
- Whenever possible, let your hair dry naturally. Avoid using a hair dryer, tongs, straighteners etc. as the heat may damage your hair.
- Avoid sleeping with rollers in your hair.
- If you have lost underarm hair, try not to use deodorants and use un-scented talcum powder instead.
- Try wearing a turban, hair net or soft cap around your head at night to collect any loose hairs.

How will I cope with hair loss?

Hair loss can be very distressing for some people. You may feel your hair is an important part of your identity and losing it may affect your confidence and self-esteem.

Many people choose to wear a head scarf, turban, hat or wig once their hair falls out. Others wear nothing at all. Some people might keep their wig for special occasions, and wear a headscarf at other times. It is important to do whatever makes you feel most comfortable.

Where can I get a turban?

The hospital will provide you with turbans. Alternatives are available from some chemists, department stores, online and specialist wig stores.

Where can I get my wig?

Your SACT nurse or specialist nurse will provide you with a list of salons that supply, fit and style wigs. Visiting the salon offers greater choice of wigs but you can arrange for a wig fitter to visit you on the ward if you prefer.

If visiting a salon, we recommend phoning and booking an appointment. If you have any mobility issues, it is also worth checking their accessibility. Not all salons will be on the ground floor.

It can be a good idea to visit a few different salons as they will stock different styles and ranges of wigs.

You may want to have a friend or a relative with you when choosing your wig. They can help you to pick something that suits you best.

There is no pressure on you to choose a wig immediately and you can always leave it for a while until you feel ready.

Do I have to pay for my wig?

Your SACT nurse or specialist nurse will give you a voucher. This will cover the cost of your wig. Please remember to take it to the salon with you when picking your wig.

When is the best time to get a wig?

You can pick your wig at any time, however we recommend that you don't have your wig fitted until after you lose your hair. This helps to ensure that your wig is a good fit.

Where can I get help?

Hair loss can be very distressing for some people, even more distressing than the treatment itself. Within the hospital we have a clinical psychology service that can help with worries or fears that you may be having concerning your hair loss. Or you may want to talk to your SACT nurse or specialist nurse who can provide help and support during this time.

This leaflet is for general information only. For more personalised information, please ask a member of clinical staff.

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