

Two Mystifying Words: ALOPECIA AREATA

(pronounced al-oh-pee-shah air-ee-AH-TAH)

by Evelyn Valcourt

Published in "Clippings", Autumn 2006

(The Official Publication of the Manitoba Hairstylists' Association)

Accompanied with emotional pain and turmoil, Alopecia Areata is an unpredictable disorder that makes hair fall out. It can show up either as solitary or multiple patches of hair loss, or as a diffuse hair loss. The patches can start small, progress for a few months, and then stabilize. After a year or so, complete regrowth could occur. In some cases, hair grows back, only to fall out again. Some people develop small areas that are hardly noticeable; others lose hair from the entire scalp (Alopecia Totalis); rarely, the complete loss of all body hair occurs (Alopecia Universalis).

1.7% of the population experience Alopecia Areata. It affects children, men and women of all ages. It is a medically harmless condition and is definitely not contagious. Psychologically, it can be acutely painful, affecting a person's emotional well-being and sense of self. Regaining the road to self-confidence and dignity while living with Alopecia Areata and finding ways to cope with the emotional pain is of prime importance. To equip yourself with all the necessary information about what to do if you are diagnosed with Alopecia Areata, there are pamphlets available, such as "Do You Have Alopecia Areata?", "Alopecia Areata, What is it?", "Helping you Cope with Alopecia Areata", "What you Should Know about Alopecia Areata" and "Helping you Help Yourself". I have some of these pamphlets available, which I give out to Alopecia clients who have made an appointment to come and see what options are available. And there ARE options, such as hair fillers and lightweight hand-made wigs with refined fibers in a large variety of styles and colors. By talking with clients affected by this kind of hair loss, it has certainly made me aware that these children, men and women need a listening ear and compassionate care and attention. Most people are seeing a dermatologist by the time they make arrangements to come and see me. Some are trying cortisone injections, topical minoxidil, anthralin cream or ointment. We have to remember that to this date, there is no known cure for this no known cause hair loss.

A person's professional hairstylist is sometimes the first one to notice these small patches and will let their clients know about it. It can be quite alarming to be diagnosed with Alopecia Areata. As I am writing these words, cancer patients come to mind. I have had reflections from Alopecia clients that they would prefer being diagnosed with cancer, as they know a cancer patient's hair will inadvertently grow again. Most cancer patients' greatest fear during treatment is the loss of their hair. Even though they know it will come back, the fact of losing their hair like Alopecia Areata patients causes the same fear and indignity and affects their self-esteem and well-being in the same way. This is a very sensitive issue for clients with Alopecia Areata. While the cancer patient's hair loss is an induced Alopecia, the other is not, and it is not known what is causing it or when, or if, it will stop.

I am a member of the National Alopecia Areata Foundation – NAAF (www.naaf.org). The Foundation:

- Raises funds and awards research grants to study the cause of Alopecia Areata to develop effective treatments and to seek a cure.
- Provides emotional support through personal contact and written materials to help those with Alopecia Areata and their families.
- Acts as the international center for Alopecia Areata information.

- Conducts ongoing public awareness programs and nationwide campaigns to educate about Alopecia Areata.
- Organizes an annual patient conference.
- Publishes a newsletter five times a year for people with Alopecia Areata and their families and friends to interact and receive the latest information on all aspects of the disease. It contains news about research and treatments, personal stories, cosmetic tips, information on support groups and a children's section called Kid Net.

With a lot of fundraisers happening and a lot of money being raised, maybe in my lifetime I will see research find a connection between induced Alopecia from cancer treatments and the sudden onset of Alopecia Areata, and a cure being found for both devastating diseases.