

Beauty When Stress Causes Hair Loss

BY ALISA HRUSTIC

A year after the coronavirus first hit, doctors are discovering that dealing with it has unexpected side effects. One of them is hair loss—in particular, a form called telogen effluvium, a temporary period of shedding that happens after a stressful event. It's affecting people who had the virus, but also those who lost their jobs, cared for an ill family member, or were thrown into the world of homeschooling on top of working from home, says Yolanda Lenzy, M.D., a board-certified dermatologist and the author of *Getting to the Root*.

A bit of strand science: You shed up to 10% of your hairs (roughly 100 strands) a day—that's totally normal. During telogen effluvium, however, that amount can shift up to as

much as 30% and lead to daily loss of about 300 strands or more, says Dr. Lenzy. A major stressor can suddenly propel hairs in the growing phase (known as anagen) into the resting phase (telogen), causing them to be released from their follicles in large numbers. “When you go through these stressful situations, the body is shifting its resources away from the hair to the vital organs,” Dr. Lenzy explains.

FINDING THE ROOT CAUSE

Stress-induced hair loss isn't unique to COVID-19—it can happen with any illness, particularly if you have had a high fever or a severe infection or undergone an operation. It can also be spurred by significant weight loss over a short period of time, nutritional gaps (low protein intake or iron deficiency anemia, for example), or hormonal imbalances (such as hypothyroidism or stopping birth control). It can even happen following “good stress,” Dr. Lenzy says, most often after having a baby.



GETTY IMAGES

Most of the time, people are able to pin down their triggers, but when telogen effluvium turns chronic—which occurs about 10% of the time—it may be harder to identify. It can become a vicious cycle: A major stressor spurs the hair loss, but the hair loss perpetuates the stress, so the shedding continues.

After all, finding a clump of hair in the shower or in your brush can be a bit traumatic, particularly for women, as research shows that our hair is often tied to our self-esteem and how we present ourselves to the world. “A lot of people are super distressed, as you can imagine, when they're losing hair,” Dr. Lenzy says.

GETTING A DIAGNOSIS

Because there are so many forms of hair loss and shedding—including genetic thinning and autoimmune conditions such as alopecia areata—it's crucial to see a dermatologist specializing in hair loss. There's no single lab test for telogen effluvium (beyond checking for deficiencies and hormone troubles), so they'll be able to perform a "pull test." "We take a section of hair and pull it from root to tip to see how many hairs come out," explains Dr. Lenzy, who doesn't recommend trying this yourself. "If we get more than three to six hairs in a section, that's a positive pull test." These strands will come from the follicle and have white bulbs at the roots.

ROAD TO RECOVERY

Thankfully, your hair will start to grow back on its own six to nine months after the stressful event, Dr. Lenzy says. There's no guarantee that you can speed up growth, but there are things you can do to support your hair (and your body):

PRIORITIZE SELF-CARE

Overall, Dr. Lenzy recommends adopting habits to support your entire body: Find time to de-stress, eat a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, stay hydrated, exercise regularly, and get enough sleep.

DON'T STOP WASHING!

You may be tempted to skip the shampoo because you see more strands in the shower, but that's a mistake, Dr. Lenzy



says. The hair has already been shed, and rubbing the roots just releases it. Plus, healthy

hair starts with a healthy scalp. Go for gentler sulfate-free formulas, but skip shampoos that claim to make hair grow. "This is a process your body is going through, and a \$100 shampoo is not going to stop it," Dr. Lenzy says.

PREVENTION PICK: Neutrogena Healthy Scalp Micellar Water Shampoo, \$12, walmart.com

SKIP THE STYLING TOOLS

While excessive styling doesn't cause shedding, it can cause the hair to break mid-shaft, Dr. Lenzy says. Avoid using heat, chemical treatments, and dyes. Instead, give your locks some love with a deep conditioning treatment as needed for a boost of nourishment.

PREVENTION PICK: Olaplex No. 3 Hair Perfector, \$28, sephora.com



TRY A SUPPLEMENT

A supplement isn't a quick fix, but Dr. Lenzy says there are formulas designed to support hair health. She's seen good results in her own patients "who have lost a lot of hair and want to thicken things up as fast as possible."

PREVENTION PICK: Nutrafol Women, \$79 per month, nutrafol.com

