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Fearing stigma, women keep hair loss under their caps

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When women want to remove body hair that they deem unwanted or unsightly, there's no shortage of creams, devices and businesses dedicated to that purpose.

On the flip side, however, there's a corresponding topic that's rarely discussed - or even acknowledged - but one that afflicts women of all ages: androgenic alopecia aka female pattern baldness.

According to the American Hair Loss Association, women constitute around 40 percent of hair-loss sufferers in the United States.

"There's a societal stigma that women feel when they lose their hair," explains Boca Raton dermatologist Dr. Marta Rendon, a nationally recognized hair-loss expert. "Because of this, many stay silent about it, never seeking treatment."

To combat this mind-set, the American Academy of Dermatology designated August as National Hair Loss Awareness Month. The designation comes just a month after the U.S. Food and Drug Administration cleared its first clinically proven female-hair-loss treatment protocol in nearly a quarter-century (more on this device in a moment).

"The biological reasons why women lose their hair are more complex than with men," says Rendon. "It's partly genetic, but researchers have also found that hormones and thyroids play a role."

Rendon points out that male pattern baldness most often occurs in a fairly predictable fashion - that is, a receding hairline around the temples and forehead, and/or a loss of hair at the crown of the head.

Women, on the other hand, experience hair loss in a more haphazard way, she notes: "The areas where women lose their hair, or experience major thinning, are more irregular. Sometimes it's all over the head evenly, sometimes it's in localized areas."

In 1988, the FDA approved the substance minoxidil (brand name: Rogaine) as being a scientifically proven, effective topical treatment for regrowing lost female hair.

Last month, the FDA cleared the HairMax LaserComb (hairmax.com) as only the second, clinically proven means to accomplish the same thing. FDA "clearance" means that the company is allowed to market the product as a medically verified way to treat androgenic alopecia.

The device, which women are instructed to use at home three times a week for a few minutes per session, utilizes laser-light technology. The laser increases blood flow to the scalp, thus stimulating the metabolism of hair cells.

Trial studies showed that, after six months, women using the device experienced a significant thickening of their thin "vellus" hair into more lustrous "terminal" hair. What's more, some users began seeing results in as little as three months.

Rendon, whose patients began being able to buy the device from her in July for around \$500, notes that combining the HairMax LaserComb with Rogaine "potentiates the positive effects of both."

And while it's still too soon for Rendon and her female patients to begin proudly showing off "before" and "after" photos, she's optimistic about the long-term possibilities.

"All the research I've seen on this device is so encouraging," Rendon says. "I really believe it's going to help a lot of people."

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