Hair Loss, Self Esteem, and You: Coping With Losing Your Hair

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Tips for Coping With Kidney Cancer and Hair Loss

Finding out you have kidney cancer (also known as renal cancer) is scary. You're bound to have lots of questions. After asking about the stages of cancer and what the prognosis is, often one of the first questions asked is, "Will I lose my hair?"

Kidney Cancer and Hair Loss

Hair loss is typically not a side effect of the cancer itself, but the treatments selected to battle the cancer. Chemotherapy medications often damage the hair right at the hair follicle, causing the hair to fall out.

Hair may fall out just from the head, or all over the body. While most people will lose hair with certain chemotherapeutic agents, not everyone will.

Radiation may also cause hair loss, if the radiation is centered on the head. This probably won't be a concern for people with kidney cancer.

Hair does grow back after treatment. It may even grow back before the treatment has reached completion. If hair loss will occur because of chemotherapy, it will most likely happen within the first two weeks of treatment.

Cancer and Wigs

Wigs can be a great way to cope with hair loss. Although they are not your hair, there are a lot of options available.

The American Cancer Society recommends shopping for wigs prior to treatment or when it first begins. This way it is easier to match your current hairstyle and hair color. Keep in mind that as you lose your hair, you may need a smaller wig so make sure the wig is adjustable.

Often, insurance will fully cover the cost of a wig for cancer patients. Insurance is not likely to cover it, however, if the prescription says "wig" — instead, ensure that the oncologist writes "cranial prosthesis" on the prescription.

There are several options for wigs, with the most common being actual human hair and synthetic hair. Synthetic wigs will require less upkeep, whereas wigs with human hair may require more styling but more like your hair.

Tender Loving Care is a catalog produced by the American Cancer Society that sells wigs and other head covers, such as scarves, turbans, head wraps and sleep caps.

Cancer and the Scalp

In addition to causing hair loss, chemotherapy can cause the balance of the oils on the skin to become out of balance, causing itching, flaking and dry skin. Rubbing the scalp daily with a perfume-free lotion can soothe and moisturize the scalp, thus preventing flaking of the skin.

Often people with hair loss complain of being cold; taking care to wear a hat or a scarf over the head while outside can prevent heat loss.

There is nothing that can be done to prevent hair loss if you will have this side effect because of chemotherapy. However, being gentle with hair can the amount that falls out at a time. Brushing as little as possible while being gentle with tangles is advised. In addition, going easy on aggressive styling aids such as curling irons and straighteners can also help.

Scalp massage can also be comforting. Using almond oil or olive oil can moisturize irritated skin. Research shows that scalp massage may also stimulate hair growth.

Look Good Feel Better

The Look Good Feel Better program is a program created by the American Cancer Society, in conjunction was Personal Products Care Council and Professional Beauty Association, that provides workshops for women and teens who are suffering from various types of cancer.

Volunteers — all of which are licensed cosmetologists — host the program. They must undergo a certification process to lead the workshops. The actual workshops are two hours long and provide instruction skincare, makeup, nail care, and discussions regarding hair loss and care of wigs, turbans, and scarves.

For people who are unable to attend the workshop, often one-on-one consultations are available. The one-on-one consultations will allow the participant to learn to use their own makeup.

Using Therapy to Cope With Kidney Cancer and Hair Loss

Cancer is complicated — you can expect to feel many emotions. Losing your hair is bound to be upsetting, but this is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

If your oncologist has not recommended therapy to sort out your feelings and emotions, ask for a referral to a health psychologist. A health psychologist is a psychologist who is trained to work with patients with a wide array of health conditions; they will be able to help you deal with many of the emotions you are feeling.