



HAIR LOSS AFTER CANCER TREATMENT: COMPARING THE EXPERIENCE OF YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN.

Background

Hair loss resulting from chemotherapy can be a distressing experience. Previous research has shown that it can affect self esteem and confidence at an already difficult time in patients' lives. However the experience in men has attracted hardly any attention.



Kate Hunt
Professor

"This study has found that men and women have similar difficulties in adjusting to hair loss following cancer treatment. Understanding these experiences can help health professionals support patients in dealing with what can be a traumatic and distressing side effect of treatment."

Aims and methods

This study compared the accounts of both men and women to explore what, if any, differences exist. The research involved analysing interviews conducted with 37 people who had been treated for cancer. Their ages ranged from 18-38. Nineteen – 11 men and 8 women – lost their hair as a result of chemotherapy. The interviews were initially carried out for the DIPEX project (www.dipex.org) which was established to gather information on personal experiences of health and illness.

Key findings

- Only one woman and two men (out of the 19 in total) reported no problems related to losing their hair.
- Young men appeared to have as much difficulty as women in adjusting to hair loss and other people's reaction to them.
- There were several similarities between the accounts given by men and women who experienced problems. They spoke of a sense of shock and strangeness about losing their hair. It made many men and women acutely aware of their vulnerability and their visibility as a "cancer patient." Some also experienced various negative reactions as a result of their hair loss.
- There were also important differences. Women were concerned with hair loss above the eye line while men were affected by losing hair from other parts of their body. Only women were encouraged by others to disguise or try to prevent hair loss.
- Few of the men and women who reported problems anticipated what losing their hair would be like.

Conclusion:

- The findings support previous research that hair loss following chemotherapy can cause traumatic changes in appearance or identity.
- It offers new insights into men's and women's experiences and shows that men can experience similar problems to those of women.
- Those interviewed were ill-prepared for other people's reaction to them and felt exposed, stared at and judged. This perhaps highlights the need to raise public awareness of this issue.
- These findings could also be used by health professionals to help patients better understand what hair loss means for them and how it may affect them.



Photo with kind permission from www.DIPEX.org

Further information: full report available on www.ascr.ac.uk

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Reference: 'Psycho-Oncology', 2007, www.interscience.wiley.com