

Alopecia Areata

What is alopecia areata?

Alopecia areata is a condition that causes hair loss on the body. The scalp, eyelashes and eyebrows are common areas. It can affect people at any age.

What causes it?

The exact cause is not known. Sometimes, the body's immune system attacks healthy cells by mistake. This is called an autoimmune disorder. The hair starts to grow in the hair follicle under the skin. The healthy hair cells are attacked and the hair is lost. A family history of autoimmune disorders, especially thyroid disorders, may be linked to alopecia areata.



How is it diagnosed?

Most often, alopecia areata is diagnosed by a physical exam. Hairs may be taken from the scalp and looked at under a microscope.



How will it affect my child?

Hair loss can start suddenly and continue for several months. The areas of hair loss are often in round or oval spots. The skin may be red and slightly swollen when the hair loss first starts. In time, the skin gets smooth and soft. Some hair may be white before hair loss or when the hair starts to re-grow. Hair may start to re-grow without treatment. Most patients will have all hair grow back within about 1 year. Some patients will have alopecia areata again after the hair has re-grown. Alopecia areata may also cause lines, pitting, thinning, or peeling of the nails.

How is it treated?

There is no cure for alopecia areata. Treatment may help control it, but does not prevent new areas of hair loss. The most common treatment is a medicine called corticosteroids. It is either put on the skin or given in a shot. Treatments can take 3 to 6 months before improvement is seen. Hats, headbands, or hair style changes may help cover the areas of hair loss. Hair loss may cause some patients to feel badly about themselves. This condition can cause problems for a long time. Psychological support and counseling may help your child.

ALERT: Call your child's doctor, nurse, or clinic if you have any questions or concerns or if your child has special health care needs that were not covered by this information.

This teaching sheet is meant to help you care for your child. It does not take the place of medical care. Talk with your healthcare provider for diagnosis, treatment, and follow-up.