



# WHAT *Happened* TO MY HAIR

Writer PENNY MUSCO is one of 30 million American women who suffer from thinning or lost locks. Here's what the infomercials don't tell you, and doctors only reveal behind closed doors, about coming to terms with hair loss.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANN CUTTING

**S**ome women can restrain themselves from asking their husbands pointed questions they don't really want the answer to, like "Does this dress make me look fat?" or "Do you think our waitress is pretty?" I am not one of those women. Which is why as we stood in the bathroom brushing our teeth

over the sink one night, I asked, “Do you think I’m losing more hair?”

“Yes,” my husband replied without hesitation.

Stricken, I turned to him, his eyes growing wide with regret over his hasty answer, his fumbling apologies muffled by foaming toothpaste. But I couldn’t blame him. He’d only spoken a truth I’d hoped he would deny. At 57 my hairline has receded, and no stylist’s layered cut or deceptive part can hide that fact anymore. It’s my private despair, what I call my “doll’s hair,” so sparse up front that I can make out individual follicles. The rest of my mane isn’t anything you’d see swirling in a shampoo commercial either. And my eyebrows? Let’s just say I’m single-handedly keeping a certain cosmetic company’s brow pencil line afloat.

I pulled myself together that night but my husband’s words hit me harder the next day, when I crumpled into tears after another long, heartbreaking look in the bathroom mirror. Ironically, he’s also losing his hair. But there’s a devastating double standard in how men and women handle disappearing hair. Guys have sexy bald role models like Taye Diggs and Bruce Willis. Women have...a secret shame. A mere bad hair day is enough to undermine our self-confidence, so imagine dealing with my unnaturally high forehead and see-through locks every morning.

Then comes the blame. I trace the smooth, pale, slightly shiny band framing my face that used to be covered by hair and wonder: Is it my fault? Have years of coloring destroyed my follicles? Did the cornrows I got four years ago tug at my roots too tightly?

The first dermatologist I consult dismisses such thoughts—and pretty much all my other concerns too. A blood test reveals acceptable hormone levels. She suggests Rogaine. It doesn’t work. I try camouflage with a scalp-concealing powder. (You’ve probably seen the infomercials.) It looks ridiculous. I check out shampoos and volumizing conditioners with enticing

promises. No success. I even move my part so much to one side that my fine strands come dangerously close to the dreaded comb-over.

We all expect some thinning as we get older, but not this. I’m shocked when I touch bare scalp as I run my fingers through my hair and see patches when I lift up my locks. Sometimes I imagine people looking at me with pity—but

## SHEAR MADNESS

### *Misleading advice about recapturing your crowning glory*

**“You should take more vitamins.”** Unless you’re deficient in, say, iron, there’s no reason to take supplements. Biotin is often touted as a boost for thinning hair, but while some studies show it strengthens brittle nails, it does nothing for hair, says Rochelle R. Torgerson, M.D., assistant professor of dermatology at Minnesota’s Mayo Clinic.

**“Try a special shampoo.”** “There is a lot of false advertising of products that are expensive and don’t work,” says Paradi Mirmirani, M.D., a dermatologist at Kaiser Permanente Vallejo Medical Center in California. The only products that are likely to deliver results have minoxidil listed as an ingredient.

**“Stop treating your hair.”** Excessive heat and overprocessing usually affect just the hair shaft (not the root), causing breakage (not hair loss). “People try to find something that they did, something they can change to make the problem go away,” says Dr. Torgerson. “You wouldn’t tell someone with female pattern thinning that they can no longer color or perm their hair. You’d tell them the opposite—do what you want to make yourself feel good about your hair.”

### **Q. Are there any new drugs on the horizon to help with hair loss?**

A. Clinical trials are being conducted to see if bimatoprost, the active ingredient in the eyelash-growing drug Latisse, can regenerate scalp hair. “Even if it only helps a little, it would have a huge positive impact,” says Marc R. Avram, M.D., clinical professor of dermatology at Weill Cornell Medical College. Stem cell research—“hair cloning”—is also being looked into. “If you could get to the hair follicle and multiply it in a limitless way, you would largely solve hair loss for the overwhelming majority of people,” says Dr. Avram. But testing in humans is still years away.

then maybe I'm just projecting my feelings onto them.

No other women in my family have this problem, so hair becomes my solo obsession. When I surreptitiously check out women's heads at the gym and the supermarket, I become envious of their lush tresses. My husband and I visit a 92-year-old friend of his family whom we haven't seen in years. "Her hair looks better than mine!" I moan to him afterward.

My rising panic propels me to another dermatologist, who recommends a scalp biopsy. The devastating diagnosis: scarring alopecia, a usually permanent condition that occurs in 3% of hair loss sufferers as a result of inflammation due to anything from a chemical relaxer to hot-combing your hair to an autoimmune disease. (Non-scarring alopecia, which includes hereditary hair thinning, is more common and generally reversible). I'm referred to a rheumatologist, a specialist in joint, bone and muscle diseases, who conducts a slew of tests to see if the alopecia is a result of something like lupus. Thankfully, it's not. But I do have systemic inflammation. Why, no one can say. And I have no other symptoms except my dead follicles.

I seek out a dermatologist who specializes in hair, and she starts me on corticosteroid shots to the scalp to stop the loss. It's not fun. Even less enjoyable are the effects of a drug she prescribes to tackle the inflammation from the inside, which on top of heartburn can cause ulcers. After a month my stomach rebels so much that I ditch the pills.

Desperate to do something about what's left, I consult a plastic surgeon about a transplant. My intact lower posterior hairline is a good "donor site," I'm told, but even if the scalp inflammation is controlled, there's no guarantee it won't come back and attack the relocated hair. The \$9,000 estimated bill to do the job is an awful lot to pay for a procedure that might not even work and won't be covered.

My hairdresser, who does her best for me, suggests a human hair weave. I meet with an "image consultant" at a nationally known company. The



## GONE TODAY, HAIR TOMORROW

### *A 4-step plan to save your strands*

**Get to a dermatologist, pronto.** Find a provider sooner rather than later (when you have less hair to save) at [aad.org](http://aad.org) (American Academy of Dermatology) or [carfintl.org](http://carfintl.org) (Cicatricial Alopecia Research Foundation). "You want somebody with a specific interest in hair dermatology," says Rochelle R. Torgerson, M.D., of Minnesota's Mayo Clinic.

**Opt for medical procedures first.** Again, you want to save what hair you have. For non-scarring alopecia, there's the topical foam minoxidil (Rogaine). The 5% solution is labeled for men, but Paradi Mirmirani, M.D., of Kaiser Permanente Vallejo Medical Center in California, says off-label use is safe and effective for women. Corticosteroids—topical or injected—are used for scarring alopecia as well as some types of non-scarring alopecia.

**Consider cosmetic solutions second.** Beware of expensive gimmicks, but keep in mind that it doesn't cost anything to investigate scalp concealment (it didn't work for me, but it could for you), hair weaves, transplants and even wigs.

**Be patient.** "Anything you're going to do to impact hair is measured in months, not days or weeks," stresses Marc R. Avram, M.D., of Weill Cornell Medical College.

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## When Kids Lose Their Hair...

It's usually temporary once you figure out the cause.

**Traction alopecia**, caused by consistently wearing too-tight braids or ponytails, is remedied by stopping the extreme hair styling.

**Tinea capitis (aka ringworm of the scalp)** is a common fungal infection that can cause itchy red patches on the scalp and result in brittle hair that falls out. See your child's doctor for an oral prescription and medicated shampoo suggestions.

**Alopecia areata**, an autoimmune disorder and type of non-scarring alopecia, can cause hair loss anywhere on the body, including eyebrows. "Up to 65% of patients who have this disease present with their first hair loss prior to 16 years of age," says Sharon Albers Glick, M.D., director of pediatric dermatology at the State University of New York Downstate Medical Center in Brooklyn. For many children with the condition, the hair regrows on its own, but they may also be treated with topical corticosteroids and sometimes minoxidil.

**Telogen effluvium**, a form of non-scarring alopecia, is usually due to a trigger, such as high fever or severe stress. Once the cause is dealt with, hair will come back on its own.

*(continued)*

# BEFORE YOU BUY A WIG...

## *How to find the perfect hairpiece*

**Pick a Number.** Figure out your budget and don't be discouraged by the amount. A wig can cost anywhere from \$29 to \$6,000. "A good retailer will have a piece for every budget," says hair replacement specialist Jilena K. Zeviar, owner of Salon Zeviar in New York City. How long it will last ranges from a few months to a few years, depending on what it's made of, how often you wear it and how well you take care of it. Partial options, such as an integration piece (which allows your real hair to pull through), are also worth considering.

**Call Ahead.** You can't judge a shop by its newspaper ad, a website or even a local salon's recommendation. "Phone first and ask about the services they offer, the price range of products and the cost of a consultation—which should always be free or deducted from the purchase," says Jeffrey Paul, author of *Women's Hair Solutions to Thinning and Loss*. If there are no centers near you, shop online. "Just make sure you can return the hairpiece, and find a local salon with experience cutting and styling wigs," he says.

**Get Informed.** Once you arrive, expect to be schooled—not sold—on solutions. "They should educate you on your options given the state of your personal hair loss," says Paul, who owns the Jeffrey Paul Restoring Beautiful Hair center in Fairview Park, Ohio.

**Sleep on It.** "Don't make a decision that day," suggests Paul. "We advise clients to go home, think about it, talk to your significant other or a close friend." Taking the time to weigh your alternatives means you're more likely to make the best choice. —Lynya Floyd

receptionist—also a client—lets me paw through her curls, like a mother chimp grooming her young, to see how the piece appears up close. Not bad. The cost is a few thousand. Maybe I could swing it—except the hair has to be replaced annually. There's no way this middle-class middle-ager could ever justify dropping nearly four grand a year on hair for the rest of her life.

So after two years, five doctors, various remedies and a consultant who hounded me with follow-up calls for weeks, I'm done. Well, almost. I'll continue the injections until my dermatologist gives me the all clear. I'll keep investing in a good color, cut and styling. Someday I may even consider a wig. But for now, I've

stopped trying to "fix" my hair. My husband (who has recovered from his momentary lapse in tact), family and friends love and accept me just the way I am, full head of hair or not. Now it's time for me to find it within myself to do the same.



**Author Penny Musco has come to terms with her hair loss.**

**familycircle.com**

For answers to your questions about losing locks go to [familycircle.com/hairloss](http://familycircle.com/hairloss).