

Alopecia - not just a man's problem - Sinead O'Neill

BALD patches, receding hairlines, hair falling out in clumps... sounds like a man's problem, right? Wrong.

Growing numbers of women are reported to be suffering from the classic symptoms of hair loss, a condition which, up until now, has been largely associated with middle-aged men and stressed-out mums.

Research conducted by the support group Alopecia UK shows that around 1.7 per cent of the British population suffers from some form of hair loss, 57 per cent of whom are women.

Here in Ireland, the condition is also believed to be on the rise, although no statistics detailing the disorder have yet been compiled.

"It is a far bigger problem than people think and it is definitely on the increase," says sufferer Sarah Murphy (19).

"It could be that more people are simply talking about hair loss now but it does seem to be a condition that is becoming more common."

Alopecia, as the ailment is known, attacks hair follicles near the scalp, weakening the strands and causing them to fall out.

It also slows down the production of new follicles, meaning that hair can take months or even years to properly grow back.

In severe cases, known as alopecia totalis, sufferers can lose all the hair from their scalps, while others may fall victim to a loss of body hair all over, known as alopecia universalis. Sarah, a student nurse from Cork, suffers from the latter.

She was first diagnosed with alopecia at the age of 16 after noticing that her hair had begun to fall out in clumps.

Within a few months, she had lost 50 per cent of the hair from her scalp but it soon grew back, much to her relief.

Several attacks followed however and, in December 2003, Sarah began to notice that she was beginning to lose hair from other parts of her body as well as her scalp.

"By March the following year, it had nearly all disappeared," she says.

Although the disorder can affect children, it is adults like Sarah who suffer the most from alopecia, which can strike unexpectedly, causing female sufferers in particular to feel embarrassed and distressed.

Despite the growing profile of the condition - Princess Caroline of Monaco and Matt Lucas of Little Britain both have forms of alopecia - little is known about its causes.

A family history of the disorder is believed to account for around 20 per cent of alopecia cases but a link with auto-immune disease - in which the body mistakenly attacks the hair follicles thinking they are harmful bacteria - has also been suggested.

What causes the immune system to savage the scalp in this way is unclear but experts have suggested that anyone with a history of other auto-immune diseases such as diabetes, lupus or thyroid disease could be at increased risk.

Treatment for alopecia sufferers is limited.

Cortisone and steroid injections, used in the attendance of many auto-immune diseases, have been known to stimulate follicle growth but do little to prevent hair loss to begin with.

While alternative therapies such as hypnosis, acupuncture and aromatherapy are recommended by alopecia support groups, no evidence of their success in stemming the

condition has been found.

As a result, those with alopecia are forced to deal with their illness head-on and live with the sudden and unexpected loss of hair which can strike at any time.

“The lack of treatment or explanation for alopecia is incredibly frustrating,” says Sarah, who wears a wig to cover her condition.

“Steroid injections are all very well but any hair growth you receive as a result is only a side effect, not a solution.

“Instead, you have to learn to deal with your hair loss but the psychological impact of doing so is hard, especially for young girls.

“My friends and family have been an amazing support to me but it can be hard to cope with watching your hair fall out and having people wondering what’s going on.”

Although the physical effects of Sarah’s disorder are limited, like many sufferers, she is prone to an increased number of infections, given that she lacks the eyebrow, nose and ear hair needed to prevent the spread of dust and germs.

Instead of letting her alopecia get the best of her, Sarah has dedicated her spare time to setting up a support group, Alopecia Ireland, for other sufferers of the condition.

“When I was first diagnosed, I couldn’t believe how little help and information was available,” she says.

“I couldn’t understand why there weren’t more support groups out there and I didn’t believe that I was the only person in Ireland with alopecia.

“After chatting to people on messageboards, I decided to set up my own website and the response so far has been brilliant.”

Sarah acknowledges that living with alopecia has been difficult but believes she has finally accepted her condition and encourages other sufferers to do the same.

“The most important thing is to remain positive,” she says.

“The unpredictable and sudden nature of hair loss is difficult to live with but there is every chance your hair could grow back.

“You have to remember that alopecia is only superficial - you are not sick, you only look different.”

For more information about alopecia, see www.alopeciaireland.org.