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CANCER

Coping With Chemo-Related Hair Loss: 7 Tips for Choosing the Best Wig for You

If you're planning on using a wig for hair loss due to chemo, it's smart to learn how to find the right one before your hair starts falling out.



By Barbara Brody

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Natural and synthetic cranial prostheses each have pros and cons. [Getty Images](#)

If you've been diagnosed with cancer and are going to be treated with chemotherapy, chances are you have lots of questions about what to expect. One that tops the list for many people: "Am I going to lose my hair?"

The likelihood of that happening depends on the specific drug regimen prescribed. (Your doctor should be able to tell you.) But the reality is that while not everyone who receives chemotherapy ends up bald, many do. And while some take hair loss in stride, it's not unusual to feel profoundly sad or anxious about this side effect.

"I've met thousands of women [going through [breast cancer](#) treatment] over the past 10 years, and so many have told me that losing their hair was harder than losing their breasts," says [Martino Cartier](#), a high-profile hairstylist and salon owner in Sewell, New Jersey and the founder of [Wigs & Wishes](#), a nonprofit that provides free wigs to women battling cancer.

The good news is that there are more options to help people deal with chemo-related hair loss than ever before. Some women try [cold cap therapy](#), a type of therapy in which you wear a cap infused with coolant that reduces the flow of chemo to your hair follicles.

Others proudly go bald. Turbans, hats, and scarves have become more popular in recent years. And wigs, a longtime standby, now come in a wide range of natural-looking styles, says [Linda Whitehurst](#), a national project director for [Look Good Feel Better](#), a charitable arm of the Professional Beauty Association.

Here are seven expert tips for finding a wig you'll love.

1. Consider Whether You Want to Match Your Current Hairstyle or Mix Things Up

Some women take wig shopping as an opportunity to experiment with a totally new look, whether that means becoming a blonde for the first time or trying something shockingly

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unexpected, like a blue hue. The safest choice is to seek out a style that's similar to your current style.

2. Want to Stick With Your Look? Find a Good-Hair-Day Picture

If you'll be enlisting help from a wig expert, share a picture of yourself on a great hair day, advises Cartier. "We tell women to send us a picture of when they loved their hair's color, texture, and length" so they can try to match it.

3. Decide Whether You Want to Cut Your Hair Short Before It Starts Falling Out

Most people who end up losing their hair find that it starts falling out two to four weeks after the first infusion. Whitehurst generally advises women to cut their hair shorter before that happens, noting that "it's horrific when hair starts coming out if it's long and tangled."

Cartier, on the other hand, says that if you have long hair and will be getting an equally long wig, getting a pixie cut might be a mistake, because your hair will look short for a few weeks before it suddenly looks long again (thanks to the wig). Instead, he suggests selecting your wig and then waiting until your hair is just starting to thin to start donning it.

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4. Be Prepared to Shave Your Head Before You Make the Move

Whether you take the middle way by getting a shorter 'do or not, when it's time to wear your wig you're going to have to buzz your head. The best wigs make it look like hair is growing out of your scalp, so you won't want anything underneath. "The correct way to

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do it is to use a men's clipper and take the guard off, which is called a zero and will give you a five-o'clock shadow," says Cartier. Don't use a regular (non-electric) razor, which can cause ingrown hairs and irritation.

Whitehurst agrees that standard razors are a no-no: "It's amazing how many doctors tell women [undergoing chemo] not to shave their legs but forget to tell them not to shave their head," she says.

5. Figure Out How — or if — You're Going to Pay for It

Wigs can cost anywhere from \$30 to several thousand dollars. Although higher price often does mean better quality, most solid synthetic wigs are under \$500. (Wigs made of human hair are more expensive.)

If you're planning to foot the bill yourself, aim to visit a wig salon, because it's hard to get the fit and color right when shopping online, says Whitehurst. If you must shop online, make sure the store has a good return policy.

Before you dig into your own wallet, you should know that you may be able to get a wig for free or at a reduced cost. First, check with your health insurance company, as it might cover or subsidize wigs (aka cranial prostheses) for cancer patients. You can also ask your local hospital or infusion center if they know about any "wig banks" in the area: During these pop-up events cancer patients try on and select free wigs that have been donated (or paid for by a fundraiser), says Whitehurst.

The American Cancer Society sells affordable wigs through their not-for-profit website and catalog called TLC (Tender Loving Care). People who can't afford to buy a wig can call the ACS cancer helpline (800-227-2345); you'll either be directed to a wig bank in your area or given a gift certificate so you can order a wig through TLC.

There are also a few nonprofits that provide wigs to cancer patients totally free of charge. Cartier's Wigs & Wishes is one of them: The organization is based at his salon in New Jersey, but it has a national and international network and will ship wigs all over the world. (Women send in pictures and the organization selects wigs for them.)

You may also want to explore [EBeauty Community](#), which runs a free wig exchange program (survivors donate used wigs, which get refreshed and sent to current patients), and the [Verma Foundation](#), which gives away free cap wigs (baseball caps with soft linings and hair attached to them).

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6. Consider a Low-Maintenance Synthetic Wig

Unlike natural (human hair) wigs, synthetic ones easily hold their style and don't have to be washed as often. "A woman going through chemo doesn't want to have to wash and style a wig three times a week," says Cartier. Synthetic wigs also tend to be lighter and don't frizz up on humid days. Other characteristics to look for include "lace front," which will help your hairline look more natural, and a "monofilament" cap, which is sheer and stretchy and contains individually knotted fibers, says Whitehurst.

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7. Learn How to Wear and Care for Your Wig

Wearing a wig isn't complicated, but proper alignment is key. "New wig wearers tend to have it too far down on their face," says Whitehurst. "You need to push it back to where your original hairline was for it to look natural." Others wear it too tight.

Look Good Feel Better offers free hair-covering workshops that go over these sorts of details. You can search for one in your area, or sign up for a virtual workshop at [LookGoodFeelBetter.org](#).

Cancer comes with a lot of changes, but if you choose the right wig and wear it correctly, your sense of style doesn't have to suffer. "Oftentimes a woman will walk into the salon shaking and crying, so fearful of what's to come, but we can turn that around," says Cartier. "Ninety percent of them say, 'It looks better than my own hair.'"

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