Bulimia and hair loss [1]

Dear Alice,

So I WAS bulimic for about five months but today it has been almost a month since I have stopped. Sadly, my hair has EXTREMELY thinned out and I am desperate for my old thick and gorgeous hair! I am eating normally, having tons of protein, and taking Biotin but some days it looks worse or just not improving, how long until I see results?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Congratulations to you for your month bulimia-free! Hopefully you are getting the support you need to maintain healthy eating. In addition to the psychological distress of bulimia, there are a number of physiological problems that can develop [2], of which hair loss is just one. The good news is that hair loss is temporary, but the bad news is that it can take awhile (as you may have been noticing) for hair to return to its previous state. It generally takes 6 to 12 months before hair growth starts to resume normally.

Bulimia is an eating disorder usually characterized by a pattern of eating that involves bingeing (consuming large quantities of food at one sitting) and purging (doing something to expel the consumed food, i.e. forcing oneself to vomit, taking laxatives, or excessive exercise). People with bulimia may become deficient in certain nutrients, may develop a high level of acidity in the body, have poor blood circulation, and are often dehydrated. All four of these conditions on their own can contribute to hair loss. Put them all together, plus the psychological stress (another factor hostile to hair), and you have the perfect storm for hair loss.

Hair is made of a protein called keratin, the same protein also found in skin and nails. When your body becomes deficient in protein and certain vitamins, hair growth is one of the first functions to go because the body prioritizes vital organs over hair. Thus, the hair growth cycle becomes disrupted. There are three primary phases of hair growth. On the first stage, hair grows from the root. In the second, hair grows also from the shaft. The final stage is the loss phase. Both nutrient deficiency and gastric problems can result in the first two stages being cut short, leading to premature hair loss. So hair loss occurs because the rate of hair loss increases (a typical individual loses between 50 and 100 hairs per day) and because hair is not being replenished at the same rate. High acidity also makes it harder for hair to thrive, as does dehydration, which makes hair dry and brittle. Poor circulation means less blood flow to
the scalp, which further starves hair of nutrients. So all of this explains why it’s taking a while for your hair to return to normal.

Bulimia can also cause complications with kidney, liver, and heart functioning. Excessive vomiting can cause damage to one’s stomach, esophagus, and mouth, because the acidity is harmful to both soft tissue and teeth. So again, the fact that you have stopped your bingeing and purging and are recovering is wonderful news for your health all around, hair included.

If you’re interested in finding more support in your recovery from bulimia, you can try the The National Eating Disorders Association [3] for referrals, assistance, support, and other information.

Take care,

Alice!

Related questions

- Dangers of bulimia [8]
- Stress leads to hair loss? [9]
- Vegetarian ? Hair loss? [10]
- Forced vomiting effects on singing [11]
- Shaving head ? Hair grows back thicker and healthier? [12]

Resources

- Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [13]
- Mental Health Service (CUMC) [14]

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