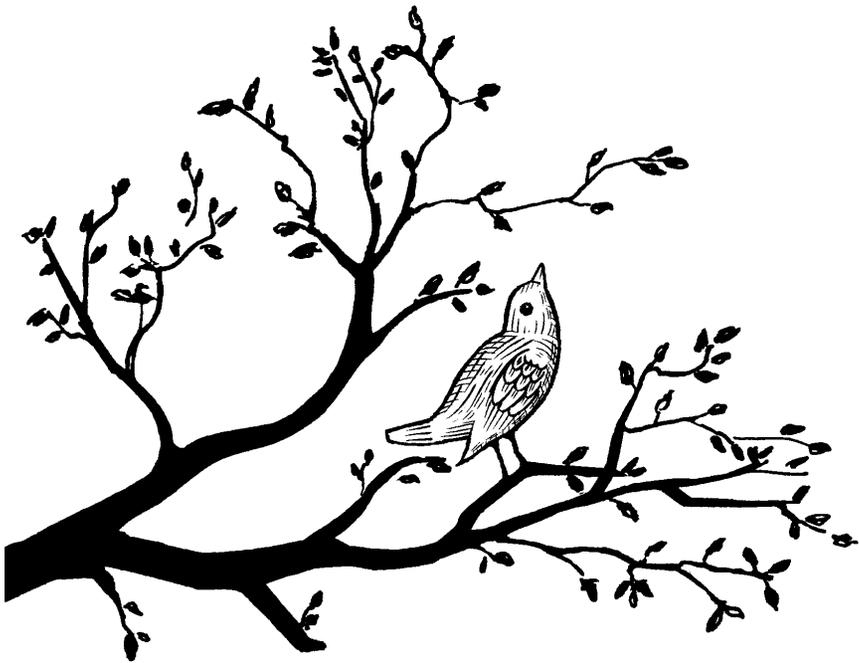


*Thoughts on*  
*Living with Cancer*

**Coping with Hair Loss  
Due to Chemotherapy**



*by Caren S. Fried, Ph.D.*

## My Personal Experience

*In 1994, I was told those fateful words:* “You have cancer.” At that time, I was 35 years old, a biologist, wife, and mother of a two year old. I was diagnosed with lung cancer, even though I had never smoked. My cancer treatments included two major lung surgeries (which resulted in the removal of my right lung), various standard and experimental aggressive chemotherapy treatments, and numerous alternative therapies. Despite all this, my cancer persisted. But so did I!

A turning point occurred for me when I decided to focus on my health instead of my illness. I believe that cancer is an illness of the body, mind, heart, and soul. Therefore, for me being healthy meant dealing with the emotional, psychological, and spiritual issues related to cancer as well as undergoing the physical treatments. In addition to the various conventional and alternative therapies which I pursued, writing became an important part of my own healing journey with cancer. To be able to express my emotions, thoughts, and beliefs in writing was critically important for my own overall health.

These pamphlets grew from the numerous notes that I wrote every day in my healing journal. The information that is available for newly diagnosed cancer patients can sometimes be overwhelming. It was my intention, therefore, to write short pamphlets concerning various topics that deal with the practical issues of living each day with cancer. I hope that these pamphlets will encourage discussion of topics that are often difficult yet necessary to deal with and to help cancer patients and their families make the numerous decisions that need to be made during this time.

Healing is a very personal issue and each person must find his/her own path to healing from cancer. To this day, I continue to focus on my health each day, to live a full active life as a mother and wife, and to pursue a new career as a writer despite cancer. It is my hope that these pamphlets will be useful for others seeking out a healing journey while living with cancer and beyond.

*Caren S. Fried*

## *Thoughts on* --- *Living with Cancer*

### **Coping with Hair Loss Due to Chemotherapy**

*by Caren S. Fried, Ph.D.*

## ***Coping with Hair Loss Due To Chemotherapy***

*Seeing my bald head in the mirror each morning was a constant reminder that I was living with cancer. I would put on one of my colorful turbans, scarves or hats, gather my inner strength, and go forth in my day.*

—C.F.

**H**air loss due to chemotherapy is a very difficult and complex issue for the cancer patient. It is often regarded as a minor inconvenience relative to the entire cancer treatment. However, hair loss is a physical side effect with many psychological and emotional aspects that often are not addressed by the doctor. Hair loss due to chemotherapy is a symbol of someone who is battling cancer - something that you thought would never happen to you. It exemplifies the lack of control over one's life that a person often feels after being diagnosed with cancer.

Your hair is a symbol of your identity. People describe other people by the color or style of their hair. Sometimes, when people feel that they want to make a change in their life, they will change their hairstyle. Your hair is part of who you are. Hair loss due to chemotherapy forces you to change your identity. It



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exemplifies the fact that you will never be the same person that you were before you were told you had cancer.

Losing your hair from chemotherapy should never be compared to balding that occurs in some men as they grow older. The physical process of losing all (or much) of your hair within just a few days is completely different than what occurs in balding. Even more important, the psychological issue of losing your hair because you are being treated for a life-threatening illness is completely different than the psychological issues involved in balding.

It is important that family and friends, as well as doctors, recognize that losing your hair from chemotherapy can be very traumatic. Watching helplessly as your hair falls into your hands each day can be a devastating and depressing experience and should be acknowledged as such. It is insensitive to tell the cancer patient that it is “just your hair”. It would be much more comforting to the cancer patient to simply say “it must be very difficult to deal with losing your hair.”

### ***Losing Your Hair***

Each person loses his/her hair differently. You may lose all of your hair, some of your hair, or even none of your hair. You may lose it within days or weeks after your first chemotherapy treatment. You may lose more and more hair after each treatment. Some of your hair might start to grow back between treatments and then fall out again after every treatment.

The extent of hair loss should not be correlated with the effectiveness of the cancer treatment. Caregivers and friends should not say “the fact that you are losing your hair must mean that the chemotherapy is

working.” This provides no comfort to the patient and is not necessarily a correct statement. If people do not lose all of their hair, then they may worry that the treatment is not working. When their hair does return after treatments are stopped, people may worry that their cancer is going to return too.

The most important advice for when you lose your hair is to do whatever is most comfortable for you. When your hair gets all over the bathroom floor, will it make you feel better to clean it up by yourself? Or would you rather have someone else clean it up for you? Would your spouse or child like to help you clean it up? (This may enable them to feel that they are sharing this traumatic experience with you.) Since much of your hair will probably come out during a shower, you might want to have a good hair collector on your shower drain so that you are not concerned about clogging up the drain pipe.

When you sleep at night, there will probably be lots of hair on your pillow in the morning while your hair is falling out. (If your hair continues to grow and fall out again after each treatment, this may be a constant problem.) Some people may suggest that you put a towel on your pillow, but a towel may not be comfortable to sleep on. You can leave the hair on your pillow and just change the pillowcase when you want to. Another suggestion is to wear a turban-like head covering while you are sleeping and then shake it out in the morning. This can be useful also if your head gets cold while sleeping. A pet hair pick-up is also a handy item for getting loose hair off of your pillow, sheets, clothes, etc.

If you have long hair, you may want to consider getting a very short haircut before you start your chemotherapy treatments. Whether you have long or



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short hair, you may even consider shaving your hair off. Cutting or shaving your hair may give you a sense of control over your body instead of feeling helpless as you watch your hair fall out. On the other hand, it may be too difficult emotionally to cut your hair or to shave your head in advance of your treatment. It is your choice.

### ***Living With No Hair***

Before you lose your hair, start looking into what you want to wear on your head. If you are most comfortable with a wig, then wear one. Maybe even buy two or three if you want. When you buy a wig, go to a store that specializes in wigs for people without hair. These are often called medicinal wigs. These are a little different than wigs for people who wear them over their own hair. You will probably want to buy the wig before you lose your hair. However, you may find that it is uncomfortable once you lose your hair and you may want to buy another one. Some medical insurance companies will cover the cost of one wig if you have a note from your doctor. If your head itches when you wear the wig, try putting powder on your head and wear a cap on your head under the wig. The wig store sells the under wig head caps.

There are other choices besides a wig. There are many different kinds of hats, scarves, and turbans. Again, there are ones made for people who have hair and people who do not have hair. There are several mail order catalogues for head coverings for people who have lost their hair due to illness or chemotherapy.

Discuss your hair loss with your immediate family, especially your children. If you have a young child, you may be tempted to hide the fact that you have no hair. However, it will be more stressful for you worrying about whether or not your child will see you with-

out hair. You will find that your child will adapt to your hairlessness very easily. Most likely, your hair loss will have a significantly less impact on them than it will on yourself. It is important to discuss with older children how they feel seeing you without hair. Discuss what you will be wearing around the house, especially if their friends come over.

Ultimately, you need to do whatever is most comfortable for you! Your head covering (or lack of) is something you have to look at and wear everyday. If you are uncomfortable or if you are worried about what other people will think, you will be adding stress to yourself at a time when you need it the least.

### ***Regrowth Of Your Hair***

At what point is your hair long enough to go without your wig or hat? Only you can decide this! Many people will give you their opinions on when they think your hair is long enough to go out in public. People may try to convince you to get rid of your wig or hat before you feel ready. Only you can decide when you are comfortable going out in public with your new hair style. Rather than trying to be upbeat about the person's new hairstyle, friends and caregivers would provide more comfort if they recognized the stress of the situation and simply said "It must be very difficult for you to decide when to go back out into public without your wig or hat."

Again, you have to do what is most comfortable for you, physically and mentally. If it is in the middle of the winter, you may just be too cold to walk around without a hat until your hair is several inches long. Mentally, you may have the fear that when your hair returns, the cancer may return (although there is no evidence of this). In some cases, chemotherapy is given for pain relief without the intention of curing



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your cancer or preventing a recurrence. In this situation, regrowth of your hair can cause anxiety as well.

Just as the process of losing your hair is a complex physical and emotional issue, so is the process of your hair growing back. As your hair starts to grow in, it provides you with a new identity again. Your hair may look different than it did before your chemotherapy treatments. You may have several different hairstyles for a while until your hair grows to the length that you want it. Your new look exemplifies your new identity as a cancer survivor.

### **Summary**

Coping with hair loss due to chemotherapy can be very difficult. It is important to acknowledge the emotions of fear, sadness and anger that often accompany hair loss. For many people, hair loss is a symbol of the many difficulties of living with cancer. It is important to cope with your own hair loss in a way that reduces your own anxiety. While you cannot control the loss of your hair due to chemotherapy, you can empower yourself by deciding how you will deal with the practical issues of losing your hair, living with no hair, and regrowth of your hair.



## **Thoughts on Living with Cancer Pamphlets**

Cancer as a Whole-Body Illness



How to Be an Active Participant in Your Own Recovery:  
Guidelines for the Newly Diagnosed Cancer Patient.



Coping with Hair Loss Due to Chemotherapy



Positive Thinking - Helpful or Harmful for Cancer Patients?



Suggestions for Friends and Relatives of the Cancer Patient



An Introduction to Alternative/Complementary Therapies for Cancer



Being a Parent with Cancer



Diagnosis Cancer: Why Me?



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