

Combating Baldness Isn't Risk-Free

The most famous hair-growth agent is under attack. It's said to cause depression and potency problems

By Andreas Frey

Dangerous drug used for hair loss

Finasteride is known as an effective drug for male pattern baldness, but a new study from the US reveals that the product may cause side effects like severe depression and erectile dysfunction. Out of 12,000 male users of the medicine, 1.4 percent developed erectile dysfunction. The subjects hadn't been diagnosed with potency problems prior to their acceptance into the study. According to Swissmedic, which is responsible for the regulation and control of medical products, 124 cases of depression and sexual dysfunction have been reported in Switzerland.

If you start losing your hair, you no longer have to shave your head. Finasteride can help you with hereditary hair loss.

Finasteride has been on the market for 20 years, and it has proven to be an effective treatment for hair loss, promoting hair growth after only a few months of use. Bald spots from androgenic alopecia, a medical term for hereditary pattern baldness, are no longer inevitable. On the other hand, the drug is associated with health risks and an increasing number of reported side effects.

Hundreds of lawsuits have been filed in the US, which poses the strongest opposition to the drug.

Regular use of the drug may cause irreversible side effects, such as erectile dysfunction, loss of sex drive and depression.

New erectile dysfunction problems

The latest study on adverse sexual effects caused by the drug was conducted by the Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago, and was published in the open-access journal PeerJ in early March. Out of nearly 12,000 male users of the medicine, 167 men (1.4 percent) suffered from erectile dysfunction, with a higher chance of occurrence the longer they had been taking the drug. The subjects hadn't been diagnosed with potency problems prior to their acceptance into the study.

The study was co-founded by the Post-Finasteride Syndrome Foundation, a non-profit organization based in New Jersey, and founded five years ago to oppose the popular drug. The foundation uses the term "Post-Finasteride Syndrome" to describe all the long-term adverse effects of finasteride. On their website, besides sexual dysfunction, they count neurological and psychological side effects, including muscle atrophy, fatigue, inability to concentrate, insomnia, depression, and anxiety.

The fact that Finasteride comes with side effects is a long-known fact. However, depression, for example, is not explicitly mentioned in the medicine's insert. It was recently discovered that these undesirable effects could possibly be permanent.

Finasteride, by US pharmaceutical manufacturer Merck & Co., has been on the market since the late nineties. It has served a double purpose: initially used to treatment of prostatic enlargement, and now as a lifestyle product. It works in nine out of ten men, if there is still hair to be saved. It works best in younger patients, and side effects are more likely to occur in older men.

Its hair-growth results are astonishing. Due to its high efficacy, achieved by attacking the root of the problem, the drug is regarded as the biggest hope for patients.

The hundreds of thousands of hairs a human normally has are anchored in tiny pockets: the follicles. Each follicle goes through a cycle of growth and rest that lasts a few years, which makes losing up to 100 hairs per day completely normal. Depending on genetics and age, hair roots are sensitive to the male hormone dihydrotestosterone. Finasteride blocks the production of this hormone, therefore altering the hormonal balance. Potential effects on the heart, circulation and metabolism are still unknown. Despite this, hundreds of thousands of men use this coveted medicine every day, among them Donald Trump, as his doctor stated, according to press reports in February. Should a drug with these potentially permanent side effects be approved for hair loss at all?

The responsibility lies with the doctors

According to Swissmedic in Berne, which is responsible for the approval of Swiss medical products, there have been 124 cases of adverse reactions to finasteride in Switzerland. Among them are depression, sexual disorders and other undesirable events." However, according to press officer Danièle Bersier, these side effects are listed in the medicament's insert. She thinks the responsibility lies with the doctors.

Zurich dermatologist Ralph Trüeb calls for clarification and regulation as measures against this growing uncertainty. The former head of the Hair Department at Zurich's University-Hospital states that he has not encountered a case of post-finasteride syndrome in 20 years of medical practice. However, he would not prescribe the medicine to anyone who has ever suffered from depression. He won't stop prescribing finasteride. "The fact that the cosmetic application of this drug has survived the world market for 20 years definitively means something.

Hans Wolff, who has been treating hair-loss patients at Ludwig Maximilians University for 24 years, says: "A collective hysteria seems to have broken out in America around post-finasteride syndrome." He criticized the Chicago study, stating there was no control group that included people who did not take Finasteride. Nevertheless, he advises against taking the drug when the patient is not sure.

After all, it's a lifestyle product, and Minoxidil is an effective alternative.