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Editor's note: This English translation was done by a third party. The original digital report can be accessed [here](#).

Should We Fear Hair-loss Medications?

OUR ADVICE: One of the two medications prescribed to fight hair loss is currently suspected of serious adverse effects, including mood swings and loss of libido

By Anne Prigent

“When I was around 20 years old, I noticed I was beginning to lose my hair near the temples. I didn’t want to look like my father, who was almost completely bald at 40. So I began using minoxidil, a lotion that’s applied to areas of the scalp where the hair is thinning. But that didn’t do much. Then 3 years ago I began taking finasteride. It’s working, but I’m not sure I want to continue the treatment. Everything I’ve read recently about this medication has worried me,” says 24-year-old Arthur.

Finasteride is the drug used to treat androgenetic alopecia (the scientific name for male pattern baldness). It is prescribed in doses of 1 mg, under the brand name Propécia (as well as in several generic versions). Finasteride blocks the local transformation of testosterone into dihydrotestosterone (DHT), an androgenic hormone which affects hair loss. The problem is that it also has some serious side effects, including loss of libido, erectile dysfunction as well as psychiatric problems including depression and suicidal ideation. That, according to the French National Agency for the Security of Medication (ANSM), in an open letter sent to doctors in early February.

The risk of sexual side effects has been known since the medication went on the market in 1999

However, this alert was hardly a recent one. In 2017, the risk of depression and suicidal ideation linked to this drug was listed on the product insert for the drug. And the risk of sexual side effects had been known since the product came on the market in 1999. Worse, beginning in 2009, informational documents on the drug mention the possibility of these side effects continuing after stopping treatment. Male breast cancer was another adverse effect listed on the product insert in 2009, and was the subject of a study in Northern Europe.

Around 30,000 men in France use this medication to fight hair loss, which affects two-thirds of all men, sometimes quite early in life. Alopecia affects one in five men between the ages of 25 and 30, and one in three after the age of 30. Like Arthur, should they be worried and consider stopping treatment?

“We need to inform them. This is why we’re working on a document that will be given to patients by their doctor or pharmacist, which will repeat the warnings on the product insert,” explained Dr. Caroline Semaille.

Dermatologists are trying to be more reassuring. “We’re quite careful, we avoid prescribing this medication to young men who are already depressed,” explains Dr. Pascal Reygagne, a dermatologist who specializes in pathologies of the scalp. “Of course, for some men hair loss can be extremely traumatic,” he added.

Indeed, baldness modifies the appearance of the face, and may therefore have serious psychological consequences, especially for young men. Around 10% of men experiencing hair loss will consult a doctor to address the problem.

As in Arthur's case, the doctor often begins by prescribing minoxidil, in the form of a locally applied lotion. Hair growth is observed in one-third of those using it, a stabilization of hair loss in another third, and no effect whatsoever is observed in the final third.

"It must be applied twice daily, which can be inconvenient. And its results are admittedly less than those obtained with finasteride," says Professor Jean-Luc Schmutz, Head of the Dermatology Service at the CHRU in Nancy. Finasteride is taken in the form of a pill, and after a few months, hair growth is observed in 40% of the men taking it. Of course, none of these treatments deals with the cause of balding in men.

With minoxidil as well as finasteride, stopping treatment means that hair loss begins again, But with finasteride, its side effects are too important when compared to its benefits. "In the event of hair loss, it's not a good idea to take finasteride," the medical magazine *Prescrire* reported in early 2019.

According to Bernard Begaud, a professor of pharmacology at the University of Bordeaux, "This drug should never have been marketed for cosmetic purposes." But now that it is available, it's up to those concerned to decide whether or not to take this medication, or to stop taking it. They need to be better informed.

Surgery works, but its cost remains high

For the moment, beyond the aforementioned medical treatments for baldness, the only other option available is that of hair grafts. Research on other, further treatment is not promising. Two or three years ago, some studies were published on treatments based on prostaglandin analogues. They were found in drops used in the treatment of glaucoma and were shown to increase eyelash growth. They were then tested on hair, but "the research seems to have slowed," says Dr. Pascal Reygagne.

Other research initiatives focus on the cloning of hair. Several studies seem interesting but clearly many years of study will be necessary before there are concrete results. Surgery is apparently the only alternative to current medical treatments.

'Not before the age of 30'

The principle is always the same, no matter which technique is chosen. Hairs from the temples or the back of the neck are extracted, because as they are impervious to hormones, they will not fall out – and they are re-implanted in the areas of the scalp where balding is taking place. The implanted hairs fall out after a few weeks and do not grow back for three or four months, while the capillary root recovers and adapts to its new environment.

"It is better to operate before the alopecia has stabilized, meaning not before the age of 30. This means some men will need to take some kind of anti- hair loss medication while they are waiting," explains Dr. Jack Smadja, a surgeon in Paris. And for this specialist, a hair graft does not mean the patient can stop other treatments. "Grafting replaces hair via a mechanical process, but whatever is affecting the capillary root continues, and it needs to be slowed down," he says.

Even though the grafts are effective, they remain a pricey solution. The more grafts are done and the longer it takes, the more they will cost. For this reason, many men choose to go to

countries like Turkey for the surgery. Turkey apparently specializes in capillary implants. "There are good places, but you have to know them, and of course follow-up is more difficult," warns Dr. Pascal Reygagne.

