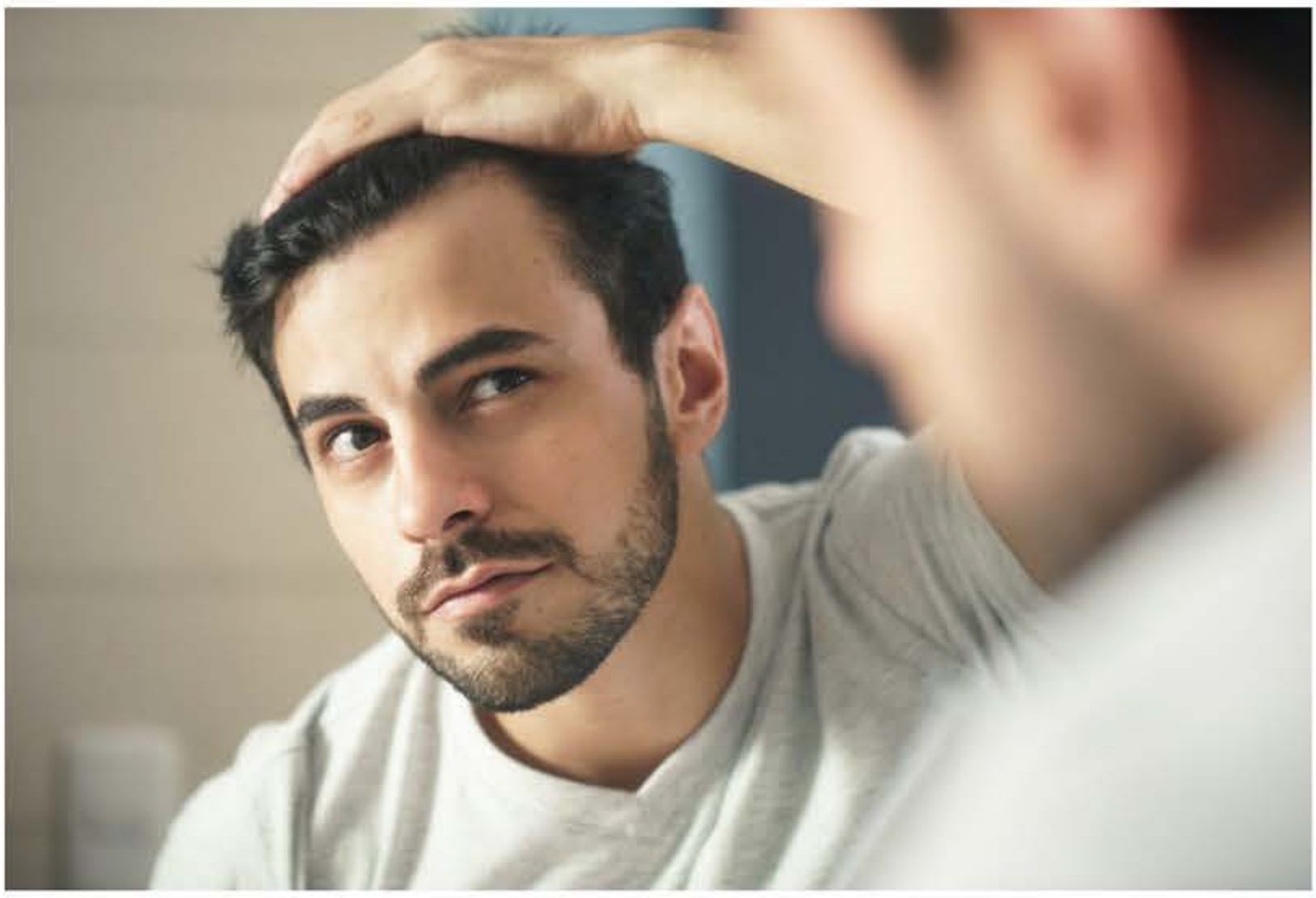

Merck has marketed Propecia to help men facing pattern baldness, but the drug's hormone-disrupting method of action is linked to dangerous side effects.(Diego Cervo/Shutterstock)

MEDICINE

Choosing Between Health and Your Hairline?

Drug marketed for baldness linked with side-effects ranging from impotence to suicide

BY MARTHA ROSENBERG TIME JUNE 14, 2022 PRINT

More than half of men older than 50 will experience male pattern baldness, according to the U.S. National Library of Medicine (NLM), and that rate climbs to 80 percent for Caucasian men. Male pattern baldness, medically known as "androgenetic alopecia," begins above both temples, causes thinning at the crown, and often results in partial or complete baldness, states the NLM website, MedlinePlus.

While androgenetic alopecia in men can be linked to insulin resistance, coronary heart disease, and prostate conditions, it also presents an appearance issue for many men who feel that they may look prematurely old or less virile. Consequently, baldness treatments such as finasteride, sold under the brand name Propecia, have been lucrative products for drug makers.

Finasteride inhibits 5-alpha-reductase, the enzyme that converts testosterone into the androgen 5-dihydrotestosterone (DHT), which tells hair follicles on the scalp to stop producing hair. Developed by Merck, finasteride was approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for treatment of benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH), or prostate gland enlargement, in 1992 in a preparation called Proscar and for treatment of male pattern hair loss in 1997 in a preparation called Propecia. Finasteride is also sometimes prescribed for use in hormone replacement therapy for transgender women.

The year after Propecia's approval, Merck launched a $60 million print and television ad campaign with the slogan, "Helping make hair loss history." Direct-to-consumer advertising, which began to supplant drug representatives selling to doctors, had just been legalized, and the Propecia campaign was so groundbreaking that it was debated by Harvard Business School alumni for its marketing value.

In 2019, 8 million prescriptions were written for finasteride in the United States, and it was the 86th most commonly prescribed medication in the country.

Concerning Side Effects Emerge

Even before the Propecia launch, serious side effects surfaced. One of the first suggestions of adverse sexual side effects associated with finasteride appeared in 1996 in the peer-reviewed journal BJU International before the baldness indication had been approved by the FDA. Impotence, ejaculatory failure, decreased libido, and gynecomastia (swelling of male breasts) were noted by researchers in patients taking finasteride. In 2010, a Cochrane Library review found that men on finasteride for BPH were at an increased risk for erectile dysfunction, decreased libido, ejaculation disorder, and impotence. By 2012, the side effects were so established that the term "post-finasteride syndrome" (PFS) had been coined and thousands of patients had contacted a group called the PFS Foundation.

Research in the Journal of Sexual Medicine in 2012 echoed the findings, noting that patients taking finasteride reported "changes related to the urogenital system in terms of semen quality and decreased ejaculate volume, reduction in penis size, penile curvature or reduced sensation, fewer spontaneous erections, decreased testicular size, testicular pain, and prostatitis. Many subjects also noted changes to their mental abilities, sleeping patterns, and/or depressive symptoms."

Worse, as early as 2013, research suggested that the sexual and psychological side effects may not go away when the patient stops finasteride, but may be permanent.