Choosing the Best Wig When Undergoing Chemo

Take the stress out of wig shopping while dealing with cancer with these tips on wig types, styles and more.

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For people with cancer who experience hair loss due to chemotherapy, wigs can provide a sense of normalcy or confidence. With so many varieties of wigs on the market, choosing the right one can be daunting. Luckily, Consumer Reports offers these tips to help you make the best choice.

“The majority just want to look normal and have their lives be less intrusive,” Hana, owner of Hana Designs in Littleton, Colorado, who underwent chemo for breast cancer 30 years ago, told Consumer Reports.

Everyone prepares for hair loss differently. Hair begins to fall out within one to three weeks after beginning chemo, according to the American Cancer Society. In anticipation of this, some people cut their hair short so the upcoming hair loss feels less jarring. Hana suggests using electric clippers rather than razors and leaving hair an inch long.

“If you clip it to the scalp, the rigid hair will push back inside and make your sensitive scalp even more tender when you sleep on it or touch it,” advised Hana. “Leaving a little bit of length will let it fall flat into a forgiving cap.”

When it comes to buying a wig, shop local, if possible, or ask for recommendations from a cancer support group. Trying on wigs in person alongside a professional stylist will ensure that the wig suits your style, skin color and budget; however, if you must shop online, make sure the retailer has a reasonable return policy as well as instructions for measuring your own head using sewing measuring tape.

Prices vary greatly. A non-costume wig can range from $200 to several thousand dollars, according to the Consumer Reports guide. Synthetic fiber hair wigs can cost around $300, while human hair wigs can cost between $800 and $6,000.

For anyone concerned about cost, some insurance plans cover wigs for people undergoing chemo. Before purchasing a wig, check with your provider to see whether you can make a claim for coverage.

“Human hair is ideal if you’re a person who likes to change it up because it has no limits,” Hana said. “You can flat iron it one day, blow it out the next day and barrel curl it for beach waves another day.”

Some people prefer synthetic wigs because they hold their style longer and don’t need to be washed as often as human-hair wigs.

Another factor to consider is whether you want a machine-made or hand-tied wig. Machine-made wigs are more affordable ($200 to $400) but tend to be more itchy or uncomfortable on the scalps of people undergoing chemo because of the way the hair is sewn or glued in place. Hand-tied wigs, on the other hand, are softer, flexible mesh caps that allow more freedom to style.

Wig accessories can make a big difference in comfort and durability. For example, wearing bamboo or cotton skullcaps between the scalp and wig can alleviate sensitivity and tenderness on the scalp. The cap acts as a protective barrier while securing the wig in place and absorbing sweat.

Last, it is important to know how to care for your wig. Typically, a wig should be washed after 14 to 18 wearings, but people with cancer who experience dry scalp could go about a month before washing. To wash, simply swirl the wig through cold water mixed with gentle shampoo and let it soak for a few minutes. Then, rinse the wig with cold water, lightly wrap it in a towel to absorb excess moisture and carefully drape it on a wig stand to dry. Lightly brush with a plastic or wire brush only when completely dry.

To learn more about hair care during and after chemotherapy, click here.

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