

The bald truth about men's hair loss

Gabrielle Fagan (AAP) / January 27, 2011 12:00AM



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THERE'S one sure way to dent a man's ego and that's to point out that he's thinning on top.

Baldness is a fate which most males dread and celebrities, as well as many other men in our image-conscious times, are now apparently prepared to go to great lengths to avoid it. Actor JAMES NESBITT, 45, recently spoke about the anguish of losing his hair: "It's horrible going bald. Anyone who says it isn't is lying."

He's reportedly had two transplants, using a sophisticated hair redistribution technique, and he says they've "changed my life".

Chef GORDON RAMSAY, 44, has also reportedly had help, allegedly costing a hair-raising \$US30,000 (\$A30,204) in a bid to thicken his thinning pate.

"The effect on men of hair loss is totally underestimated," says Shami Thomas, from Transform, the largest cosmetic surgery group in the UK which last year saw a 45 per cent rise in the number of inquiries about hair transplant surgery. "There's so much attention paid to image and appearance these days, and that coupled with the recession and insecurity about employment means people feel under pressure to look their best and avoid showing one of the key signs of ageing especially if they are competing with younger colleagues."

Many of the company's clients seeking hair treatment, she says, are in jobs such as sales, marketing, hospitality and media where appearance is key.

"Men are now seeing hair surgery as a wise investment in themselves that may protect their future," Thomas says.

There are around 7.4 million bald men in Britain, and male pattern baldness - known medically as androgenetic alopecia - affects nearly all men by the time they are 60. It can have a hereditary link.

For some, hair loss can begin in the early twenties, but in general, a large percentage will see their locks diminish by the time they are 40.

While many are philosophical and go for a shaven-headed look, others seek help using hair growth lotions, resort to a comb-over, or a toupee.

"Men may join in the laughter when people make comments like 'baldy' or 'slaphead' or comment on a 'comb-over' but often secretly inside they are hurting," says Thomas.

"Surgeons say that it's not uncommon for men to cry at a consultation and explain that they've worried about the problem for up to 20 years and finally plucked up the courage to face it and do something about it.

"But public awareness and popularity of cosmetic surgery in recent years mean we are now seeing many more younger men in their thirties prepared to come for treatment."

According to the latest statistics from the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons (BAAPS), demand for surgery, including hair transplants, by men grew by 21 per cent last year. And the huge improvement in transplant techniques over recent years, as well as the publicity given to well-known figures who've had successful treatments, is leading to a boom in numbers seeking help over hair loss, says Marilyn Sherlock, chair of the Institute of Trichologists. "About 20 years ago, hair

transplants used to look fairly horrendous. Surgeons then removed plugs from the back of the head where the hair is usually denser and repositioned them in the area where the hair had thinned," she explains.

"But if the blood supply failed, the hair later fell out and there were scars so the effect was often very unnatural.

"Nowadays, modern transplant techniques, if performed by a good surgeon, can create a completely natural effect."

Generally, she says, surgeons opt for one of two methods. Either they remove a strip of hair from the back of the scalp and then dissect the strip in single hairs and transplant them into the thinning area, or they opt for Follicular Unit Extraction (FUE) which is more complicated, time-consuming and therefore much more expensive.

With this method a surgeon removes a large number of individual hair follicles from the back of the head, where baldness is rare. In both methods the surgeon makes an incision in the thinning area and inserts individual hair follicles. FUE has the advantage of not leaving a line scar, and only leaves small spot scars.

Sherlock advises a man who feels he is losing his hair to consult a registered trichologist, a specialist dealing with the health of the hair and scalp, who can identify the cause of hair loss and suit treatment to the individual.

Thinning may be as a result of ill health, medication, diet or stress which can affect hormones.

"The craze for crash dieting is becoming a big cause of hair loss, as nutrients vital for hair growth cannot be absorbed if there are dietary imbalances," says Sherlock.

"When men go bald it can create feelings similar to a grieving process, and some may believe hair loss is so significant that they will attribute any failures in work and relationships to their lack of it," says Mr Mir Malkani, a cosmetic surgeon based in London who annually carries out around 200 hair transplants on men.

"There's no doubt that improving hair, whether by transplant or other treatments, can transform someone's life as you see a marked difference in their self-esteem and improved confidence in the way they feel about their appearance."

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO BEAT HAIR LOSS?

DIET BOOST:

Hair is composed of keratin, which gives it its strength. Too little protein - red meat, fish, eggs, chicken - affects keratin levels and hair can become weaker and stop growing, says Philip Kingsley, consultant trichologist. Eating those foods and having breakfast is key, with the morning meal the most important of the day for boosting hair follicles.

GO NUTTY:

A lack of dietary iron may also lead to hair loss, as levels of ferritin in your body may drop and disrupt the hair growth cycle and increase hair shedding, says Kingsley. He advises eating foods rich in iron, such as red meat, dark green vegetables, nuts and dried fruits.

STAY COOL:

An excess of male hormones can have an adverse effect on some parts of the hair follicle. "They can cause the hair to become thinner. When men are under stress, their body produces more male hormones and so tend to lose more hair," Kingsley says.

STUB IT OUT:

A recent report from the medical journal Archives of Dermatology suggests that smoking may be linked to damaged blood supply to the hair follicle.