Everybody gripes about the occasional bad hair day, but consider this: Millions of women would happily take wayward bangs or overzealous curls in exchange for their thinning hair or bald spots. Typically considered a male problem, hair loss affects more women than you’d expect (21 million), and what we don’t know about it far exceeds what we do. As a result, there’s little in the way of effective treatment. However, women with thinning hair—usually associated with hormonal changes or stress—may find natural methods helpful in slowing hair loss.

One woman whose hair began thinning mysteriously is 50-year-old Donna Karr*, a film producer in Los Angeles. Five years ago, shortly after undergoing a divorce and serious financial problems, she noticed her thick curly hair wasn’t so full anymore. “I couldn’t believe how much hair I was finding in the sink,” says Karr.

Desperate for an explanation, Karr consulted an internist, a dermatologist and a chiropractor, none of whom could conclusively identify a cause—or offer any solutions. “Everybody thinks the condition is from stress or hormonal changes or that it’s an imbalance in my thyroid or adrenal glands, yet all those things seem OK,” she says. “I try to stay healthy: I run three times a week, eat lots of vegetables, take supplements and never touch caffeine or sugar. Often I forget about my hair, but it’s scary when I notice so much on my bathroom floor when I brush it.” One of Karr’s worries is that she’ll end up bald. “If my hair loss continues at this rate, I don’t know if I’ll have any left in five years.”

We’re a hair-obsessed culture, and thinning hair can make people—especially women—feel unattractive, unhealthy or stigmatized. Despite the teasing bald men endure, they still have

It’s normal to lose up to 100 strands a day.

a slogan (Bald Is Beautiful) and sexy role models like Patrick Stewart and Michael Jordan. Women, unfortunately, have neither.

HAIR APPARENT
Each hair follicle (the small cavity through which hair grows) is always somewhere in its ongoing life cycle that’s characterized by three distinct stages: growth, rest and loss, according to Sylvia Brice, M.D., associate professor of dermatology at the University of Colorado in Denver. The first stage, in which hair is grown, is called

*name changed for privacy
Body Basics

The anagen phase. This typically lasts two to five years. Next, the follicle goes into a transitional resting stage (catagen) for several days, and finally, in the telogen phase, which lasts three months, hair is shed—normally about 50 to 100 hairs a day. The cycle starts all over again when the follicles begin to sprout new hair. Thinning and baldness occur when follicles do not replace shed hair.

The accepted belief among physicians is that most hair loss is due to a combination of genetics and hormonal changes, such as menopause. A less common form of hair loss is alopecia areata, believed to be an immune response gone awry in which hair falls out in patches that may not grow back.

HERBS TO THE RESCUE

Though prescription drugs, such as Rogaine, and assorted herbal remedies may help some individuals, nothing is universally effective for reversing thinning hair. A few natural remedies may work on the underlying causes—but first you must identify the reasons behind the disappearing tresses.

A healthy balance of male and female sex hormones is integral to hair growth, but it's the male hormone testosterone (produced by both men and women) that is associated with hair loss. "The hair follicle responds to hormonal levels," Brice explains. "Testosterone seems to cause scalp hair loss while encouraging hair growth in the pubic and underarm areas." So at the onset of menopause, when the body makes fewer female hormones to counter the body's existing levels of testosterone, many women experience hair loss. Supplemental estrogen can help correct the imbalance and promote hair growth, says Brice.

If your hair loss begins around the onset of menopause, you can maintain hormonal balance (and hence hair thickness) with herbs containing plant-based estrogens, such as dong quai (Angelica sinensis) or ashwagandha (Withania somnifera), suggests Linda Page, N.D., Ph.D., a naturopath and author of Healthy Healing (Healthy Healing Publications, 1997). Other herbs that exert mild estrogenic effects include damiana (Turnera diffusa), black cohosh (Cimicifuga racemosa) and sage (Salvia officinalis).

Another good choice is saw palmetto (Serenoa repens) because it blocks the formation of a type of testosterone called
dihydrotestosterone (DHT), which seems to be the culprit in hair loss, according to James Duke, Ph.D., in Green Pharmacy (Rodale Press, 1997). See a knowledgeable health practitioner to determine whether these herbs are appropriate for you.

A simple test done at the doctor's office can reveal an additional hormone—hair loss link: an underactive thyroid. During menopause, the thyroid often becomes sluggish. Adding iodine-rich sea vegetables like kelp to your diet helps boost thyroid function and supplies minerals needed for proper hair growth, says Page.

It's not uncommon for women who've undergone sustained periods of emotional strain to notice their hair thinning. "When you've had a severe psychological stress," says Brice, "a number of hairs shift from the anagen to telogen stage prematurely, and they all get shed over a period of just a couple of months." Stress may trigger this type of hair loss by weakening the thyroid and adrenal glands, according to herbalist Phyllis Light, coordinator of herbal studies at Clayton College of Natural Health in Birmingham, Ala. She recommends taking a vitamin B-complex supplement to support the nervous system during and immediately after trying times. To nourish the adrenals and act as an adaptogen to help the body better cope with physiological or emotional stress, try yucca (Yucca spp.) or the Chinese herb fo ti, or he shou wou (Polygonum multiflorum).

Sometimes thinning hair can be a result of malnutrition. A lack of the essential fatty acids (EFAs), needed for healthy cell membranes, can contribute to hair loss, skin diseases and depressed immune response. Fish oils are the most common dietary sources of EFAs, but vegetarians can supplement with flaxseed oil to prevent hair from becoming dry and brittle.

TREAT IT RIGHT
The strands you do have should be handled with care. Avoid shampoos with detergents such as sodium lauryl sulfate, ammonium laureth sulfate and cocamide DEA, which dry the scalp and hair. Instead, choose products with gentler cleansers, such as castile (made from olive oil) and decyl polyglycol (derived from corn). Other good ingredients to look for in products include the nourishing botanicals jojoba, rosemary, nettle, horsetail, sage and chamomile.

To keep from doing further damage, opt for an easy-to-maintain hairstyle (but no ponytails), limit shampooing to two or three times a week, blot hair dry with a super-absorbent towel, detangle with a wide-tooth wooden comb and avoid blow-drying. If you need to use styling products, go for sprays or gels with natural ingredients, such as flaxseed or guar gum, instead of with high isopropyl and ethyl alcohol contents. Consider installing a shower filter to reduce chlorine, which dries the hair and scalp. And definitely forgo curling irons, hot rollers, dyes and perms.

In the meantime, rather than obsessing about getting your hair to grow back, maintain a healthy lifestyle and keep your spirits up. That's the strategy Donna Karr has adopted, though, she admits, it's challenging. "With hair loss, you must be patient," advises Light. "Hair doesn't grow fast to start with, so when you're correcting a problem, you have to realize it will take months—or years—to catch up."

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**Editors' Picks**

**Shampoos and Conditioners**
- Original Shampoo from ShiKai: (800) 448-0298
- Pure Shampoo from Dr. Hauschka: (800) 247-9907
- Herbal Hair Conditioner from Dr. Hauschka: (800) 247-9907
- Alma Conditioner from ShiKai: (800) 448-0298

**Styling Products**
- More Body Herbal Hair Thickener and Styling Gel from Giovanni: (310) 952-9960.
- Natural Hold Spray from Beauty Without Cruelty: (707) 769-5120.
- Super-Absorbent Towel Aquis from Brittane: (800)-4MORDRY