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Health

'Cancer cap' helps prevent hair loss during chemotherapy

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One of the first things people, especially women, fear when they hear chemotherapy is hair loss.

For a long time, there just didn't seem to be any other way around it. If you wanted the potentially life-saving chemotherapy to treat your cancer, you had to be resigned to the fact that you were going to lose your hair.

But not anymore.

Several treatment options are now on the market that help cancer patients preserve their hair during chemotherapy, and one of them is called DigniCap. Dr. Susan A. Melin, a professor of hematology and oncology at the Wake Forest School of Medicine and a doctor at Wake Forest Baptist Health, said the treatment works by cooling the scalp to near freezing levels, which restricts the blood vessels in the scalp and slows the metabolism there. Both effects limit the amount of chemotherapy reaching the hair, so there is less loss.



Melin said DigniCap is one of the most effective treatment methods that her patients have used to preserve hair during chemotherapy.

Howard Kahen, who resides in Tampa, Florida, was diagnosed with stomach cancer late last year. He had experienced stomach pain, but thought it might be reflux or some digestive issue. He tried natural remedies, probiotics, and heartburn medications. When he couldn't get control of the issue, he made an appointment.

"It was something that just didn't feel right," said Kahen, who works as a diagnostic radiologist, reading ultrasounds, MRIs, and other imaging tests.

After two endoscopies, he was diagnosed with gastrocarcinoma in several locations. He started chemotherapy in January, and had surgery to remove his stomach in April. He also had several lymph nodes removed and finished a second round of chemo in August.

After his second endoscopy, Kahen shared his cancer news on Facebook, and a friend who is a cancer survivor told him about the cap. "I'm an older guy but I have nice hair; I like my hair," said Kahen, who is 62. "My hair is a big thing to me; people can spot me a mile away," he said. "That's a trademark feature, and it's a good feature. People identify me by my hair."

Kahen started using the cap in his first round of chemotherapy. He said that, at first, the cap was hard to get used to because it fit tightly and it was so cold.

"For me, the good news is I started seeing results – like I wasn't losing my hair," he said. In fact, he said his hair was "growing like crazy," and he got multiple compliments while he was undergoing chemotherapy, even from people who didn't know about his diagnosis.

He said his hair did start thinning during his second round of chemo, but he kept most of it. He also started to lose his other body hair, including his eyebrows and eyelashes.

For Kahen, keeping his hair wasn't just about keeping his sense of identity, but also about having some sense of control over his illness and about feeling as good as he could during treatment.

"It's bad enough that I have to go through cancer and I can't eat, I can't drink," he said. "For me, if I had to go bald on top of that, it would have been a lot worse psychologically."

Oncologists note that many patients want to keep their hair to maintain a sense of self, to keep their cancer diagnosis private or to minimize the fear that their children and loved ones feel about their illness.

"Cancer can significantly impact the patient and their loved ones," said Dr. David Wenk, who treated Kahen at Florida Cancer Specialists. "For Howard, the ability to keep so much of his hair helped give him a sense of control when his illness and the treatment was making that a real challenge. That fluffy white hair helped Howard feel stronger and more like himself throughout treatment, and that's what was important to him for his overall well-being."

Kahen pointed out that the cap is not often covered by insurance, so it can be expensive. He was fortunate enough to afford the treatment, but he encourages insurance to cover it.

"I think this should be made more available," he said. "Obviously, I can afford it, that's nice, but a lot of people can't. It makes a big difference."

Melin said there are some organizations who can help patients who want the treatment but whose insurance does not cover it. For more information about Hope for Hair, visit <https://hopeforhair.org>; for Hair to Stay, visit www.hairtostay.org.