Performing a Scalp Self-Exam by Naomi Mannino

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Hair Loss Or Not, Performing a Scalp Self-Exam Is Essential

Whether you do it yourself or have someone help you, it's important to examine your scalp at least once per month for changes, especially if you have hair loss or thinning.

"When it comes to skin cancer," says Jodi LoGerfo, a nurse practitioner and hair loss treatment specialist at the Orentreich Medical Group in New York City and "Health Talk" radio talk show host, "early detection means early cure. And this is especially important if you are experiencing hair loss and/or hair thinning because your scalp is constantly exposed to more UV light even [from] just walking around."

If you have hair loss and/or thinning, you are more at risk for skin cancer and precancer

Hair loss patients are more at risk for skin cancer in the scalp because the hair acts as a sunscreen. There can be a lot of sun damage and precancerous lesions on the top of the scalp that should be checked regularly, but many times the scalp is left out of home skin self-exams. "That's because it's difficult to see your own scalp," adds dermatologist and hair loss specialist Dr. Valerie Callender, director of the Callender Skin & Laser Center in Maryland. "I think it's important to partner with your hairstylist, if possible. They are in the optimal position above your hair while it is wet, sectioning with a comb, to look for changes, bumps or growths or to check an area where you may have pain, tenderness or itching or where you may not even be able to see hair loss or thinning," she says. Both hair loss experts agree that if you have hair loss or thinning issues of any kind, you should check in at regular intervals specified by your dermatologist for a professional scalp exam.

How to perform a do-it yourself scalp self-exam if you have hair loss or thinning

"You should get to know your skin and scalp on a daily basis by looking and feeling every day when you step out of the shower. This way if anything looks or feels different, you will notice it right away." Both experts agree that if you are handy with a mirror, you can use it to see the back, top and sides of your scalp as you move through your scalp, section by section, feeling with fingertips and looking for the following classic ABCs of skin cancer detection:

A. Asymmetry: The mole or bump is not the same on both sides.

B. Borders: The edges of the area are irregular and could be raised.

C. Color: The color of the skin has changed or varies throughout the spot or mole.

D. Diameter: The size of the area has changed or has grown larger.

"I even add E to that list, for evolving," advises LoGerfo. "If anything on your scalp is changing or sticks out because it is different than it was before, keep an eye on it." LoGerfo and Callender believe that you should be looking for any area on your scalp that is tender to the touch, itchy, crusty, pearly, movable or rough, or that bleeds constantly, is indented, raised or different in any way than it was before. This way, you may discover a treatable infection from a condition such as traction alopecia (wearing your hair too tight), as well as keep tabs on any ongoing condition you might have such as alopecia areata. Not only will you learn when something needs to be treated or watched, but you may also discover that bald patches from alopecia areata are growing back or that

your laser hair therapy or minoxidil treatments are working.

Both experts agree that those experiencing hair loss and/or thinning should always wear a hat when walking around outdoors, and if that doesn't agree with you, use a spray-on sunscreen that gets down to the scalp. "When you don't have a full head of hair, you just don't have the protection nature intended from skin cancer on you scalp, so you have to protect yourself," LoGerfo concludes.

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Naomi Mannino - About Author:
Naomi Mannino is a freelance writer who writes about health, beauty, and fashion. She is a contributing writer for HairLossDotCom and writes about a hair loss treatment and hair loss conditions such as a alopecia areata.

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