

Great hats, colorful scarves and a wig

Cancer patient shares trials of losing hair

MUSCATINE, Iowa – Losing your hair is not fun.

I suppose most people who've lost their hair already know this, but now that I'm knee deep in the process, I can say with new authority that this little chemotherapy side-effect is not something to be taken lightly.

As a society, we've come to expect hair loss in cancer patients, and accept that this is a normal stage for people trying to rid themselves of those nasty and unpredictably random cancer cells.

First, I noticed a lot of "shedding." It was annoying, but subtle as my pillow started to show traces of the changes. Inside, it felt like I was continuing the feeling that I was a walking science experiment left to watch and wonder how my body would react to chemo next.

The next stage of baldness was scarier for some reason. Each morning shower would result in handfuls of hair coming out as I attempted to shampoo. The entire bathroom seemed to have hair everywhere and it was disturbing, intriguing, and disgusting. Keeping my drain clear enough to continue the shower was a challenge as I scraped away huge clumps of hair, all while peeking in my medicine cabinet mirror to see if there were any official bald spots yet.

For several mornings I lived in fear of bald spots. I wanted to postpone the inevitable a little longer so I analyzed, gelled and tried to style the remaining hair while accepting my evolving hairline. It amazed me how fast it started to "release" and I worked hard to accept my new look, which could be best described as part newborn/part soldier. The less hair I had, the more I worried I became that my stark look would scare children

and/or make me unrecognizable to all.

Some have told me that they believe losing hair is harder on women than men. I'm not sure, but it's definitely something that makes me feel less girly all the time. As a woman, I've spent hundreds of hours and dollars cutting and removing hair in the past, yet now I clung to my stringy remnants as if they were some kind of cranial life preserver. It seemed strange to me that letting go of my hair seemed in many ways as hard as it was to let go of my left breast.

But losing hair is a lot more public than the results of mastectomy. I've gotten pretty good at disguising the end results of my surgery, but it's harder to pretend everything is OK with me when my head looks ravaged, raw, and cold. Another cancer patient told me that hair loss is difficult because, once it starts, it is like wearing a sign that reads, "Beware, cancer patient. Treat with pity and care."

Anger

It surprised me how scary hair loss is as well as how mad it made me. Sometimes I was mad at my doctors for not having better cancer solutions and sometimes I was mad at society for not demanding better cancer solutions. If we can put a man on the moon, or a woman as Secretary of State, why don't we have a better plan for beating this common disease?

PERSPECTIVE



The Good News
Amy Meyer

It seems that someone deserves a little ranting and raving about the fact that it seems perfectly acceptable that I have one of the most common killers in the world and the best plan anyone can come up with is to cut off part of my body, then systematically fill it with poison strong enough to cause a variety of yucky side effects, and follow that up with intense radiation and drugs that will alter my reproductive processes for year. And this is such a common treatment plan that almost everyone knows, and accepts, the routine.

Lucky

Yet I know that I'm one of the lucky ones. My overall prognosis is good and I've got the peace of mind of knowing that my cancer has been intensely researched, my doctors and nurses have been expertly trained, my American treatment centers are clean and modern and my support system knows no boundaries. Plus I have an employer that not only provides me with enough insurance to financially survive this setback, but also allows me to set my own work schedule.

Perhaps the good news for me this week is that I have a lot of great hats, colorful scarves, and a wig waiting in the wings. Eventually the itchy results of this process will all be washed away and I'll have several months free from shaving my legs. In the meantime, watch for the bald girl waving at you because it just might be me and I just might be starting a new trend!

Amy Meyer, a Muscatine teacher, foster mom and free-lance writer, welcomes your suggestions, comments and fashion tips. Contact her at: amymeyer@machlink.com