UNDERSTANDING ALOPECIA AREATA

What is alopecia areata?

Alopecia areata, also known as AA, is a hair loss disorder that affects around 2% of the population.[1] It typically causes patches of hair loss that can range from coin-shaped to total loss of hair on the scalp.[2]

How did I get it?

It is not fully understood why people develop alopecia areata, but there are genes that make some people more likely to get it than others. Some people have a family history, while others don't. Several potential triggers have been proposed, but there is currently not enough data to conclusively link AA to any environmental trigger.[2]

How does alopecia areata develop?

Alopecia areata is an autoimmune disease, which means your immune system is mistaking part of your body as a threat and is attacking it. In this case, your body is attacking its own hair follicles (the structures that grow hair). This immune system attack causes the hair to fall out and can prevent it from regrowing. This hair loss may or may not be persistent. Regrowth may be possible for some people.[2]

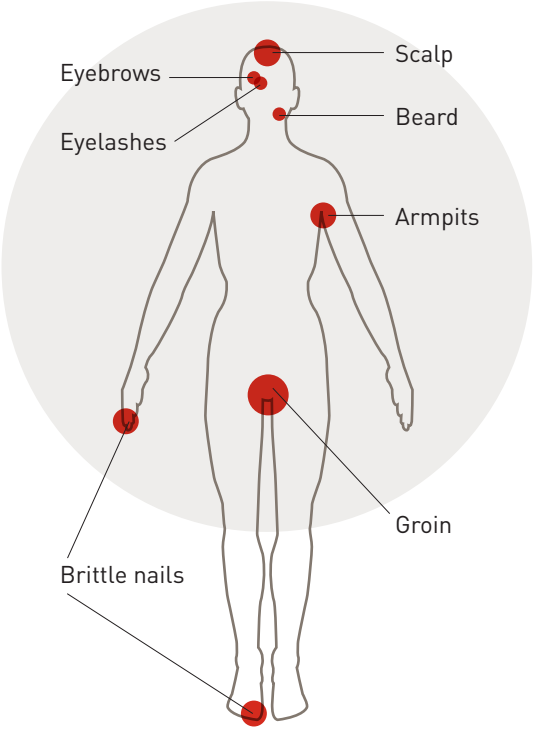
Alopecia areata is associated with other medical conditions. Some people with alopecia areata have other autoimmune or allergic conditions, such as[3,4]:

- Atopic dermatitis[5]
- Thyroid disease
- Allergic rhinitis
- Vitiligo[5]

Where on my body can I have alopecia areata?

Alopecia areata can affect different areas of the body[2]:

- Hair on the head can fall out in coin-shaped patches or in some cases, all over the scalp
- Facial hair can be affected:
  - Eyebrows
  - Eyelashes
  - Beard hair
- Sometimes, alopecia areata can cause total loss of hair all over the body, including the groin and armpits
- Nails can become brittle



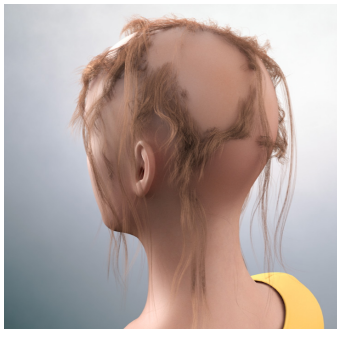
It's important to know that hair loss may or may not be persistent. There is potential for hair regrowth in alopecia areata.[2]

What does alopecia areata look like?

The location, pattern, and amount of hair loss vary in alopecia areata.

Different types of hair loss in alopecia areata[2]:

Single well-defined patches



Multiple separate or overlapping patches

Complete hair loss on the scalp (known as alopecia totalis)

Complete hair loss over the whole body (known as alopecia universalis)

Will my hair loss last forever?

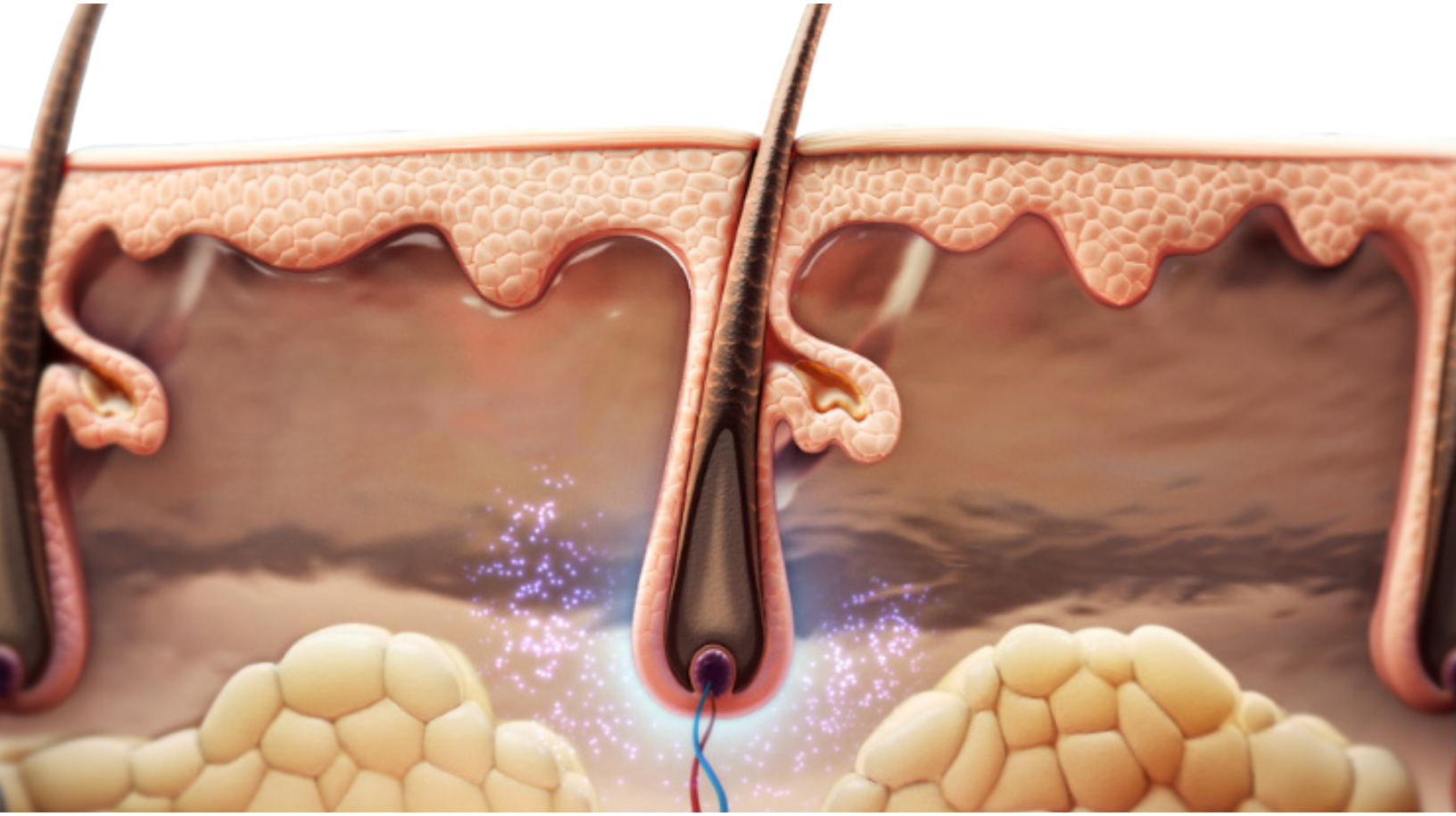
Unfortunately, there is currently no cure for alopecia areata.[2] Although there are treatment options available for alopecia areata, the response to treatment varies.[2]

Alopecia areata does not damage hair follicles, so hair may regrow. Complex signals from the immune system can keep the normal hair growth cycle from happening.[2]

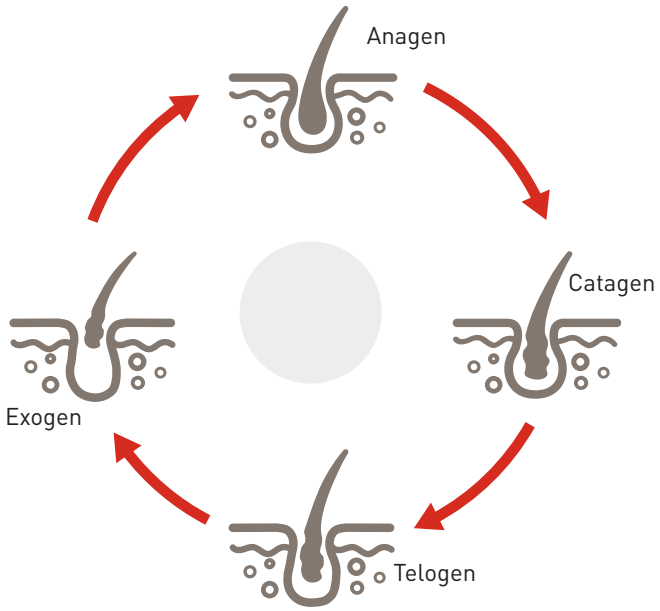
Sometimes people with alopecia areata grow some or all of their hair back, even without treatment, while others can experience persistent hair loss. Some people can also go through multiple cycles of losing and regrowing their hair.[2,6]

What happens inside the body?

It's believed that alopecia areata starts inside the body, at the root of the hair follicle. Research suggests it may be caused by an improperly functioning immune system that attacks the follicle, making hair fall out and stopping it from regrowing.[2,7] This hair loss may or may not be persistent. There is potential for hair regrowth in alopecia areata.[2]



How does alopecia areata affect hair growth?

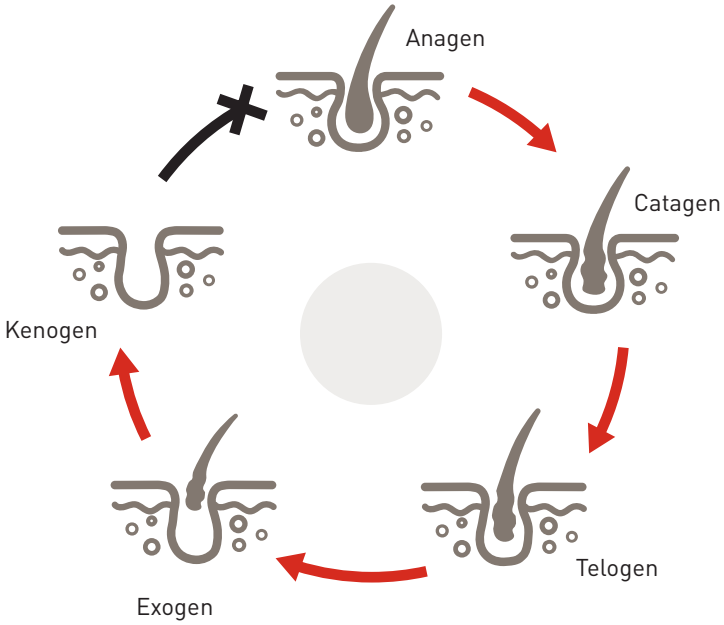


The normal hair cycle

Alopecia areata interrupts the natural hair cycle. The natural human hair cycle has four different phases[8,9]:

- The growth phase (anagen)
- The transitional phase (catagen)
- The resting phase (telogen)
- The empty follicle phase (exogen)

The normal hair cycle goes through this loop over and over again, and hair regrows automatically.



Alopecia areata interrupts the natural hair cycle[10]

In alopecia areata, the hair doesn't progress through the phases like it's supposed to. Instead, the hair transitions through the four stages quickly and enters a new fifth stage called the kenogen stage, where it remains.[2,10] It does not re-enter the growth cycle and the hair follicle remains empty.[10,11] The hair loss experienced from alopecia areata may or may not be persistent.[2] There is potential for hair to re-enter the natural growth cycle.[2]

References

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