

# Anticipatory Coping: Taking Control of Hair Loss

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Many women consider hair loss to be one of the most difficult and feared side effects of chemotherapy treatments. On learning they will likely lose their hair, women immediately begin anticipating the event and its impact on themselves and others. Anticipation of an unwanted event can lead to greater anxiety, fear, or depression, particularly if women see or find no options for gaining some sense of control. Anticipatory coping is the process of anticipation and preparation for an expected altered appearance. By researching options, making deliberate choices, and taking specific actions to determine their appearance without hair, women gain a greater sense of control of their changing appearance. This greater sense of control may ease or lessen feelings of fear and depression and help women to take control of other aspects of their lives that contribute to a greater quality of life during cancer treatment. Oncology nurses are in a unique position to help women turn their anxiety about hair loss into an anticipatory coping process, one that increases women's sense of control over some of the outward changes taking place in their bodies and empowers them to make proactive choices regarding their overall response to cancer.

**W**hich is more difficult, an unwelcome event or the anticipation of that event? In the process of anticipating events in life that trigger emotions such as reluctance, fear, or uncertainty, people often tend to envision the worst-case scenarios, possibly making the anticipation more difficult than the event itself. In the context of cancer and chemotherapy, many women anticipate and worry about the potential appearance changes that will result from treatment. Among women losing their hair because of breast cancer treatment, many indicate that coping with hair loss is more difficult than the loss of their breast because it is outwardly visible to others, affects their femininity, and is a constant reminder of their treatment (Benjamin, Ziginskas, Harman, & Meakin, 2002; Kaderman, Kaderman, & Toonkel, 1999). Feeling helpless in anticipation of a negative or unwanted event may compound feelings of reluctance, fear, and depression. Just as anticipation of a hurricane stirs its potential victims to take action to protect themselves from the worst forces of the storm, so may anticipation of a major appearance change, such as chemotherapy-induced hair loss, propel women into actions intended to help them cope with their hair loss. The purpose of this article is to

## At a Glance

- ◆ Hair loss can significantly impact a woman's perceived quality of life during cancer treatment. As an oncology nurse, providing information and self-care strategies aimed at coping with alopecia in the care plan is important.
- ◆ Helping women turn their anticipation of hair loss into a proactive preparatory process may help to reduce their anxiety and give them a greater sense of control over their changing appearance.
- ◆ Women who feel more in control may be more likely to take other actions that can improve their overall quality of life during cancer treatment.

emphasize the emotional significance of chemotherapy-induced hair loss and the important potential role of oncology nurses in helping women turn their fear and anticipation of hair loss into proactive actions intended to increase their sense of control over their changing appearance.

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