

NorthShore Researchers Offer New Hope for Hair Loss

By Martha Floberg

While your hair may be intensely personal, the loss of it is difficult—if not impossible—to hide from public view. It can be devastating for anyone regardless of gender or age. It can be especially challenging to treat when there is a sudden loss on the head or body caused by a particular autoimmune condition known as alopecia areata. An estimated 7 million Americans have this unpredictable disease in which your immune system launches an assault on your hair follicles, leaving behind one or multiple circular bald patches.

SEEKING A BREAKTHROUGH

Until recently, alopecia areata treatment options have been limited or are not consistently effective at growing new hair for every patient. A dermatology team at NorthShore University HealthSystem (NorthShore) hopes to change that as the only research site in Chicagoland in a global study targeting a promising new medication to trigger hair growth for these patients.

“We know that alopecia areata can have a profound negative effect on self-esteem and can lead to anxiety and even depression,” noted Stephanie Mehlis, MD, Director of NorthShore’s Dermatology Clinical Trials Unit. “It affects patients of all ages, even young children and teenagers, by mistakenly attacking their hair follicle roots, which is where hair growth begins.”

“Traditional treatment for alopecia areata typically begins with topical foams—and if

those don’t work, we move to steroid injections directly into the scalp to stimulate hair growth,” explained Dr. Mehlis, who serves as lead investigator on the NorthShore team studying a different approach. It is an oral medication called a JAK inhibitor.

PROMISING FINDINGS

“JAK inhibitors are an exciting class of new medications that are currently Food and Drug Administration (FDA)-approved to treat other inflammatory autoimmune diseases like rheumatoid arthritis,” said Dr. Mehlis, who holds an academic appointment at the University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine. “Through our clinical trial, we’ll hopefully get a much better understanding of the pill’s effectiveness and long-term safety in patients who have alopecia areata.”

Dr. Mehlis and her team are specifically evaluating the most effective JAK inhibitor dosage to treat the condition. The hope is that the FDA will grant approval for the drug to treat alopecia areata. The study includes patients who are

age 12 or older and have experienced severe hair loss for more than six months.

Dr. Mehlis noted that study participants travel long distances to NorthShore to take part in this worldwide clinical trial, which involves monthly checkups. “Initial trials for this new treatment option had fantastic results, and we’re excited to be able to continue offering patients hope through this ongoing research.”



Dr. Stephanie Mehlis directs the Clinical Trials Unit at NorthShore’s Department of Dermatology.



In the top image, you see significant hair loss due to alopecia areata. Below, the same patient experienced hair regrowth as part of a clinical trial at NorthShore testing the effectiveness of a new oral medication.

On the Leading Edge

NorthShore’s dermatology research team is currently accepting patients for its one-year study on alopecia areata treatments. For information on how to enroll, please contact the Dermatology Clinical Trials Unit at **(847) 492-5700 (Ext. 1254)**. You also can jump online to learn about clinical trials studying new treatment options for other dermatology-related conditions at northshore.org/a1.

Take a Deeper Dive

NorthShore Dermatology Researcher **Stephanie Mehlis, MD**, has a new blog about alopecia areata and her ongoing efforts to help develop effective treatment options. Get the facts on *Healthy You*, NorthShore’s online source for timely health and wellness news, at northshore.org/a2.