CHAPTER 4

Diagnosis and Finding a Specialist

Richard A.K. Chaffoo, MD, FACS, FICS, and Susan M. Stuart, MD, FAAD | California Hair MD

Numbered citations in parentheses refer to the list in Chapter 10: References.

How Do We Determine What Is Causing a Woman's Hair Loss?

Determining the cause of hair loss in women requires a comprehensive evaluation because **more than one condition may be present at the same time**. We begin with a thorough medical history and a complete examination of the scalp and hair, including a trichoscopy and HairMetrix analysis when indicated. Trichoscopy is particularly useful because it can help distinguish among different forms of alopecia and may identify diagnostic findings that are not obvious on routine examination. (71, 72)

We often order laboratory testing specifically selected to identify medical, nutritional, hormonal, or other factors that may be contributing to the hair loss. In selected cases, a scalp biopsy is performed and interpreted by our dermatopathologist. Scalp biopsy can be **especially valuable when the diagnosis remains uncertain or when a scarring alopecia is suspected**. (73)

Once the evaluation is complete, each patient returns to review the findings in detail. We then establish a diagnosis, or combination of diagnoses, and develop an individualized treatment plan based on the patient's specific condition and the most current scientific literature. Patients are then followed by one of the physicians in our practice with serial clinical examinations, trichoscopy, and HairMetrix when indicated so that we can objectively monitor hair density, treatment response, and whether the condition is improving, stable, or progressing.

What Should I Bring to My Hair Loss Appointment?

We ask patients to bring a list of their medications and supplements, including any recent changes in dose. It is also helpful to **bring previous laboratory results and a list of hair-loss treatments they have tried, how long they used them, and whether they noticed improvement or side effects**. Older photographs can help us see how the hairline and density have changed. We also ask about the timing of childbirth, illness, surgery, significant weight loss, and changes in hairstyling, since patients may not immediately connect these events with the onset of shedding.

When Should a Woman See a Hair Loss Specialist?

Women should consider a comprehensive hair loss evaluation **when thinning or shedding is persistent, rapidly progressing, patchy, or occurring without an obvious explanation**. Symptoms such as itching, burning, tenderness, pain, redness, scaling, or pustules may indicate an inflammatory scalp disorder and should

not be ignored. A receding frontal hairline, loss of the eyebrows, or progressive thinning at the crown can also be important clues to specific forms of alopecia. [73,74]

Hair loss accompanied by irregular menstrual cycles, acne, increased facial or body hair, fatigue, weight changes, or other medical symptoms **may indicate an underlying hormonal, thyroid, nutritional, or systemic condition**. A family history of thinning hair is also important, but it should not automatically be assumed that genetics is the only cause. Early evaluation is crucial when a scarring alopecia is suspected because follicles can be permanently destroyed before the hair loss becomes advanced. [73, 75]

How Do I Find a Qualified Physician for Hair Loss?

Hair loss has many causes, **and an accurate diagnosis comes before any treatment**, which is why we suggest choosing a physician who is trained to make it. **Board certification** is one objective way to check a physician's training, and you can verify it yourself rather than relying on a website or brochure.

Board certification means a **physician has completed approved residency training in a medical specialty and passed that specialty board's examinations**. The American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) oversees 24 member boards, including those for dermatology, plastic surgery, and otolaryngology–head and neck surgery. Hair restoration surgery is not itself an ABMS specialty**, so a physician who treats hair loss should hold certification in an underlying specialty**. Some organizations award certificates in hair restoration that are not ABMS member boards, so we suggest asking which board certifies the physician and confirming it with that board.

Questions Worth Asking Your Physician

- Which board certifies you, and in what specialty?
- Will you examine my scalp with trichoscopy and review my medical history, medications, and laboratory results before recommending treatment?
- Is a scalp biopsy available if the diagnosis is uncertain, and who interprets it?
- How will you measure whether treatment is working?
- Will you tell me when medical treatment is a better choice than surgery?

You can verify a doctor's board certification directly at **ABMS Certification Matters**, which checks their certification against the data of the 24 ABMS member boards. The board certifications that hair restoration specialists typically hold include:

- American Board of Plastic Surgery
- American Board of Dermatology
- American Board of Otolaryngology – Head and Neck Surgery
- American Board of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery

Dr. Stuart is a **board-certified dermatologist**. Dr. Chaffoo is **triple board-certified in plastic surgery, otolaryngology, and facial plastic and reconstructive surgery**. You are welcome to verify both through the links above.