

Only two medications have good scientific, unbiased proof from multiple sources that they are helpful for Androgenetic Alopecia. Those medications are Finasteride and Minoxidil. They are effective only when used continuously. Within 6 to 12 months after stopping them all benefits will be lost.

They can be used alone, in combination with each other, or combined with hair transplantation. The combination of Finasteride and Minoxidil is most effective, followed by Finasteride, 5% Minoxidil, then 2% Minoxidil.

Finasteride

Finasteride (Propecia® or Proscar) is a prescription medication that should be taken as 1 mg by mouth daily.

Finasteride partially blocks the conversion of Testosterone to Dihydrotestosterone (DHT). DHT is the main hormone in individuals with Androgenetic Alopecia that leads to miniaturization of hair.

Finasteride works best on thinning hair; it does not restore bald areas. After 2 years of use, 99% of men feel that they haven't lost more hair. In the crown, roughly 1/3 feels that their hair is the same, 1/3 feels that their hair is mildly better, and 1/3 feels that their hair is moderately better. In the front, roughly 4% feel that their hair is mildly better, and 38% feel that their hair is moderately better, with most feeling that their hair is the same as before they started. After 5 years of use, 90% of men feel that they have as much hair as before they started Finasteride.

99% of men who use Finasteride don't get side effects but it can cause temporary side effects like decreased sex drive or trouble with erections for 1%. Finasteride is cleared quickly so the side effects disappear within days of stopping it.

Minoxidil

Minoxidil (Rogaine®, Regaine, or Apogaine) is a topical solution that is applied to the dry scalp twice daily. In Canada, 2% strength is available over-the-counter (OTC). In the USA, 5% strength is available OTC as a lotion or foam.

Minoxidil was originally developed as a tablet for blood pressure control but caused unwanted facial hair growth for some when taken orally. It does not seem to improve scalp circulation, as first thought, but seems to bring on and maintain a longer Anagen (growing phase). For people with thinning, miniaturizing hair, Minoxidil can slow hair loss or cause mild to moderate improvement but rarely causes dramatic improvement.

Minoxidil should be used for at least 6 months before deciding if it is helping or not. When it first starts working, some new growing hairs may push out more telogen hairs than usual so increased shedding in the first few weeks may actually be a good sign. Most people do not notice shedding even if the Minoxidil is working.

At recommended dosages, the most common side effects are temporary skin irritation, redness, flaking, or itching. This occurs in 2% of people using 2% Minoxidil and 6% of people using 5% lotion. The 5% foam may be gentler than the 2% lotion. Other side effects like headaches, dizziness, or palpitations are unlikely to occur unless recommended dosages are exceeded or the scalp is wet leading to more absorption.

Minoxidil can also be used with hair transplantation to reduce postoperative shedding of existing hair, to help slow loss of existing hair, and to speed up the growth of the transplanted hair.