

# Hair loss in women with breast cancer can have major implications on their sense of identity

April 19 2016, by Charlotte Anscombe

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A new study from The University of Nottingham highlights the importance of hair loss to women with breast cancer.

Dr Diane Trusson from the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University interviewed 24 women about their experiences of being treated for early breast [cancer](#) and found that hair was a prominent topic, even for those who did not lose their hair.

"Women who had chemotherapy as part of their treatment often described hair loss as even more traumatic than losing their breast(s)," said Dr Trusson.

## Sense of identity

The study, 'The Role of Hair Loss in Cancer', which has been published online in journal *Cancer Nursing*, found that loss of hair, not only from the head, but also [body hair](#) and eyebrows, affected their sense of identity and the way that they were viewed by other people. For example, one woman said that she was mistaken for a man.

Dr Trusson said: "Appearing in public with a bald head was an immediate indicator that they had cancer, consequently they had to decide if and how to disguise their hair loss to control information about their health. Often they wore a wig in order to protect other people such as their children, or in the case of a teacher, to protect her pupils from seeing her hair loss."

An unexpected finding during the research was that some of the women who did not have chemotherapy and therefore did not lose their hair, also reported some distressing experiences. They often described feeling guilty that they had not suffered to the same extent as other women even if they had lost their breast(s) and sometimes wondered if people did not believe that they had cancer because they had kept their hair.

## **A visible sign of cancer treatment**

"In one case a woman described how she was bullied when she returned to work after having a mastectomy because she was unable to lift and carry as part of her duties," said Dr Trusson. "She wondered if people may have treated her more sympathetically if she had lost her hair because, unlike breast surgery, hair loss would have been a visible sign of her [cancer treatment](#)."

The study argues that visibility of cancer treatment is key to the way that people relate to others, whether this is in a positive or negative way.

Dr Trusson adds: "Patients should be provided with support and information from nurses and practitioners to prepare them for the impact on self-perception and social interactions when facing [hair loss](#). Patients should also be warned about the possible implications of not conforming to the cancer stereotype. There also needs to be greater education among the wider population about the possible side effects of cancer treatments, which may prevent [women](#) feeling stigmatised while already undergoing a stressful experience."

**More information:** The Role of Hair Loss in Cancer Identity: Perceptions of Chemotherapy-Induced Alopecia Among Women Treated for Early-Stage Breast Cancer or Ductal Carcinoma in Situ.  
[DOI: 10.1097/NCC.0000000000000373](https://doi.org/10.1097/NCC.0000000000000373)

Provided by University of Nottingham

Citation: Hair loss in women with breast cancer can have major implications on their sense of identity (2016, April 19) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-04-hair-loss-women-breast-cancer.html>

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