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Hair Transformation via Hair Transplantation

In recent years, the options for treating African-American women's hair loss have become more advanced. You might be able to put away that lace-front wig for good because hair transplantation could get you back to shaking your natural mane with the best of them.

A hair transplant is a permanent procedure in which sections of hair-bearing scalp, called "donor sites," are transferred to the thinning or bald areas of your scalp. The thought of transplanting chunks of scalp might make you say, "Yikes!" But the donor site size is only about 1 centimeter

long by 20 centimeters wide and about 3 millimeters deep. The donor strip is cut into "grafts," which are basically clusters of hair follicles that can vary in size and preparation to yield different aesthetic results. The site is stitched closed and camouflaged by the surrounding hair.

Ranging from micro- and mini-grafts, which contain one to four hairs per graft, to strip grafts, which contain 30 to 40 hairs, the best type of graft for you depends on factors like the amount of donor area you have to spare and your hair type.

After the transplant, minor discom-

fort, bruising and swelling is to be expected. Graft sites will scab as part of the healing process. There is also a chance you might experience numbness around the donor and/or recipient sites, but this typically disappears within two to three months.

The best candidates for hair transplantation are those with hair loss limited to a few very specific areas, said Dr. Jeffrey S. Epstein, founder and director of the Foundation for Hair Restoration & Plastic Surgery. One example is traction alopecia—a type of hair loss often seen in Black women because of tight hairstyles, like braids, that pull and damage hair follicles. “We want to see that they have a reasonable amount of density in the donor areas that can allow for getting enough donor grafts.”

Although grafting African-American hair can pose challenges for doctors because of its texture, coarse and curly hair covers more surface area and results in a fuller appearance than straight or

fine hair. Its natural density means it can be transplanted using fewer grafts. “With a smaller number of grafts, (African-American women) get more impressive results,” said Dr. Epstein.

When choosing your hair transplant surgeon, the most important research you can do is see examples of the surgeon’s previous work. As with other plastic surgery procedures, hair restoration surgeons have to have an artistic eye as well as surgical skill to give optimal results. Seeing your doctor’s previous work will give you a sense of what to expect from him or her. Currently, there is no American Board of Medical Specialties board for hair restoration; instead look for board certification in plastic surgery and dermatology. **S**

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In a study conducted by the International Society of Hair Restoration Surgery, one of the biggest hesitations participants had about a hair transplant was that it “won’t look natural.” Typically, the smaller the graft, the more natural the transplant will be. “The use of smaller and smaller grafts is becoming more and more state of the art, especially if you’re doing areas like the sideburns and the temples,” said Dr. Epstein.

When considering how long the entire process will take, “typically you are looking at a three- to six-week period from initial consultation to the proce-

cedure,” said Dr. Epstein. Following the procedure, graft sites are very vulnerable to external damage and infection, so you must be vigilant about caring for them. In the weeks following the procedure, you have to make sure the grafts stay clean and protected from direct sunlight. You are also encouraged to sleep in an upright position and avoid rigorous activities like exercising. “Then, once the procedure is performed, it can take six to eight months before the hairs really start to grow in.” Sometimes, multiple sessions are needed to achieve a desired fullness, but other times you can opt for a comprehensive “megasession,” during which up to 4,500 micrografts can be transplanted in a single procedure that takes five to seven hours. After each session, a healing process of two to four months is usually recommended. People who are prone to keloids or thick fibrous tissue would not be good candidates for a hair transplant.

Hair transplants can be priced by the graft or per session, but the average surgeon’s fee for hair transplantation is \$4,265, according to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery.

an increased amount of hair coming out in the shower. Shedding can also come in the form of easy hair breakage.

“The third stage is where (you) see many patches of thinning.” Look for changes in hair pattern. Is the part in your hair widening? Sometimes the swirl in your crown becomes a little more obvious.

If you notice these signs, don’t brush them off. As Grandmama always said, it’s better to be safe than sorry.

How to Identify Hair Loss

Addressing signs of hair loss early on is the best way to catch symptoms before they become irreversible and to detect what could be a more serious underlying problem or condition.

“The first stage is the hairs become miniaturized,” said Dr. Jeffrey S. Epstein. Take notice if your ponytail becomes thinner and your hair becomes very fine.

The second stage is excessive shedding. Look for