

WHY ARE WE LOSING IT?

It isn't just men who face being follicularly challenged. Here, the uncut truth on hair loss

That moment. That precise moment when someone points out your lack of crowning glory is torture. I was 15, trussed up in a Wonderbra and a cloud of L'Eau d'Issey, convinced this was the moment I'd finally get a smooch with Robert Jones, the fitty of Year 11. He leant in close and whispered the words I'll never forget, "You're going bald." Ouch.

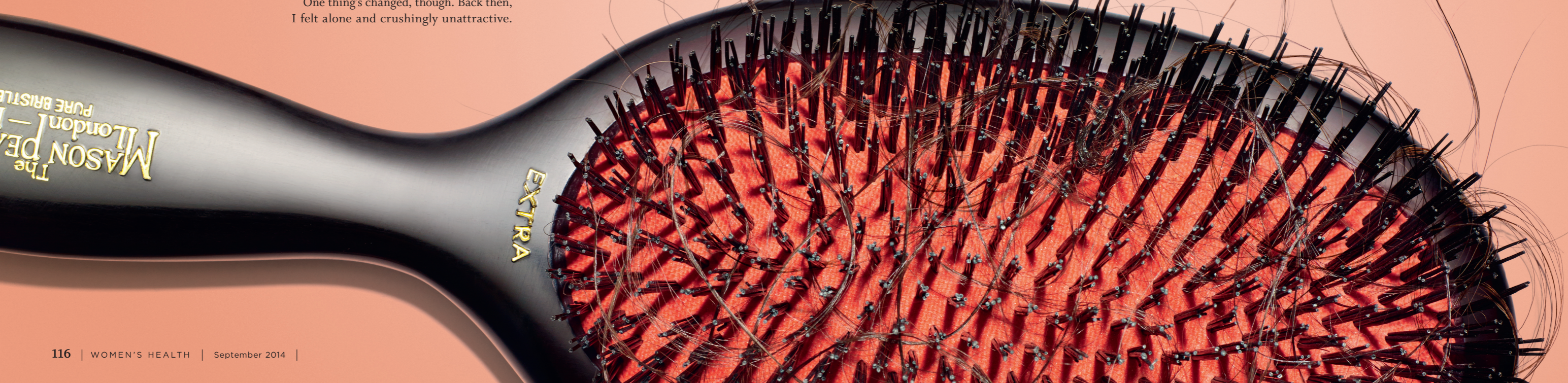
I still remember standing in front of the mirror that evening, obsessively checking the visible scalp gleaming back at me. It would be three years before I discovered this thinning hair was linked to polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), a hormonal condition, associated with symptoms including obesity, acne and, in my case, male-pattern hair loss.

One thing's changed, though. Back then, I felt alone and crushingly unattractive.

Pretty girls had *good* hair. Shiny, shampoo-advert locks are so entwined with our ideas of beauty and femininity that to lose them felt like the ultimate betrayal. Now, I'm 30 and still struggling, but, I'm in better company. Recently, when I asked the *WH* team who'd like to try hair-thickening products, a handful of people came forward, two confessing they shared my struggle.

Maybe it's because I'm hyper aware of it, but I see more and more women, like me, on the bus or in a bar, with hair that's become far from glorious. Officially, eight million women in the UK will suffer from hair loss (medically known as alopecia) at some point

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in their lives, according to the NHS. “I’ve seen an increase in the past 10 years,” agrees Lucinda Ellery, pioneer in the field of cosmetic hair loss. “There’s been a rise in the number of professional women under 40 who come to me with thinning hair.”

We know, traditionally, female hair loss occurs in times of hormonal flux – typically post pregnancy or during menopause. But what about the rest of us? “Without doubt, it’s the radical change in lifestyle,” says Ellery. “These women have demanding jobs and are under constant stress.”

Dermatologist Dr Adam Friedmann agrees: “We never switch off,” he says, referring to this inescapable ‘tired but wired’ stress-circuit we’ve been sucked into. Multitasking as standard. Juggling work, family and FOMO (why else would you end up at hip-hop karaoke on a Tuesday night?). “It all results in chronic stress,” says Friedmann. “Our cortisol and adrenaline levels are elevated more often and for longer.” Cortisol leaches nutrients from your system, sending them away from places such as hair, to vital organs.

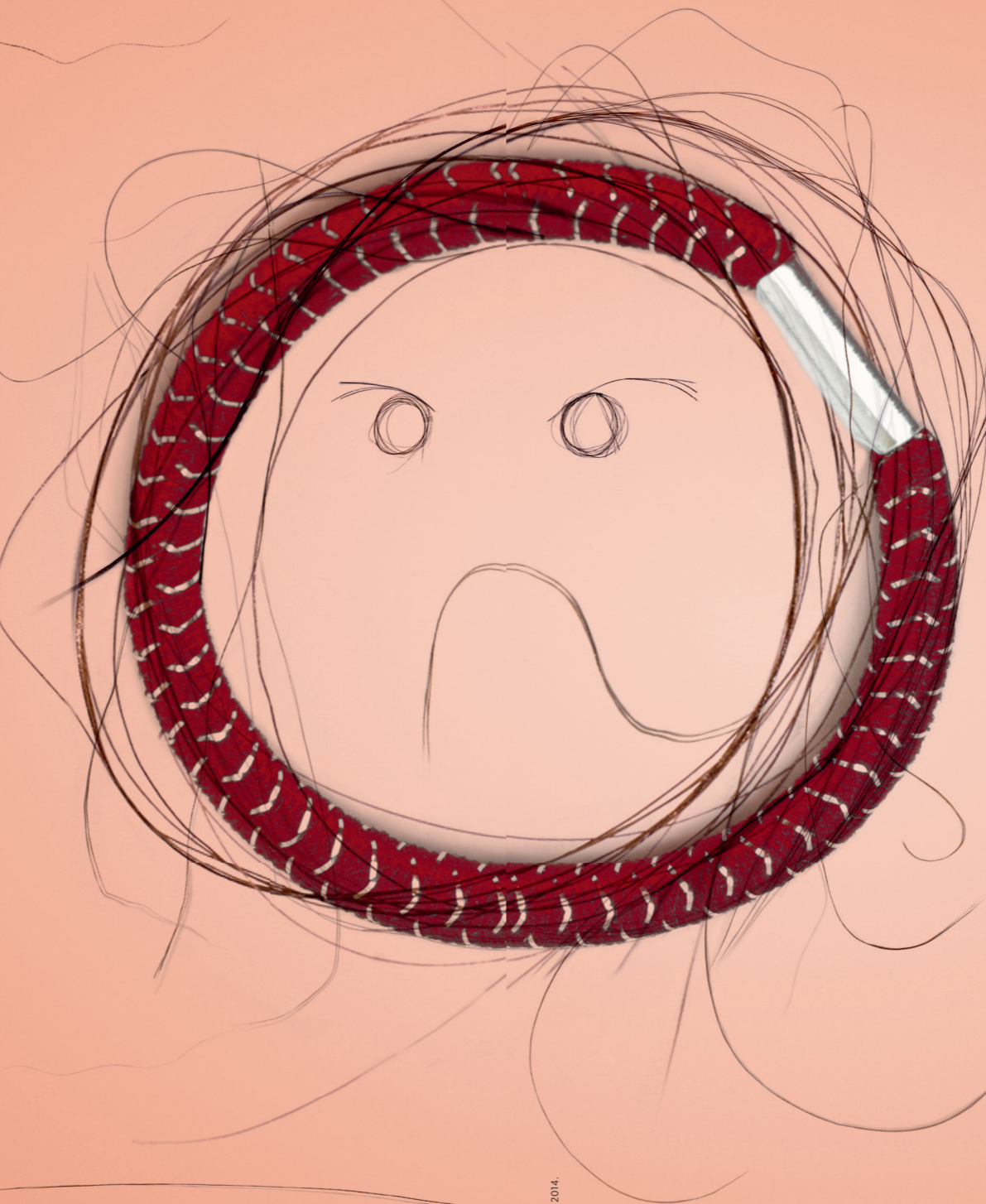
But that’s only the beginning of a complex hormonal chain that can result in different types of hair loss. “Hair grows and then reaches a resting phase where it will eventually shed, and new hair will grow – that’s normal,” says Friedmann. “But in the case of telogen effluvium type hair loss,

stress hormones called neuropeptides push hairs out of the growing phase into the resting phase – slowing regrowth to the point thinning hair becomes obvious.”

Chronic stress can also be a contributing factor to alopecia areata – circular patches of hair loss – which occurs when your immune system turns on itself, often due to your adrenal glands firing off high levels of cortisol and adrenaline. What’s the answer? Well, if you were to go to your GP, not much. “This is part of the problem,” says trichologist Glenn Lyons. “It’s so traumatic for women who are suffering from it, but as far as the NHS is concerned, it’s not high up on the agenda.” In fact, the most proven treatment – a lotion called Minoxidil, which helps keep follicles in their growing phase – is only available privately.

There’s hope, though. “There are lifestyle changes you can make,” advises hormone specialist Dr Marilyn Glenville. “You can look at bolstering the nutrients most affected by stress. We know B vitamins – particularly B5 – are heavily associated with hair and stress, so up your intake. Try eating more dark green leafy veg, nuts and seeds. Along with wholegrains, these are also a great source of magnesium, which has been shown to aid hair growth.”

It can be a case of learning how to deal with your stress. “Stress-related hair loss is particularly common with types who implode rather than explode,” explains



Friedmann. It feels almost trite to suggest it, but from brisk walks to meditation, stress relief works differently for different people. It’s a case of finding out your own chill pill.

This is equally as important if, like me and the other one in 10 women who suffer from it, your hair issues are linked to PCOS.

This takes us back to cortisol again. It makes our cells become less sensitive to insulin, so we need to produce more for it to do its blood-sugar levelling job. Insulin also acts upon the ovaries to produce testosterone (it’s normal for women to produce some) but the more insulin we release, the more testosterone we’re pumping out. Hello, hair loss.

Again, controlling your diet as well as your stress levels is key. “Insulin floods into your system when your body consumes sugar, so you need to break the sugar-insulin cycle,” advises Glenville. “Switch to a low-GI diet, based around protein, veg and a small amount of wholegrains.”

Take note: protein is a hair winner. You should be aiming for about 46g a day with a good serving for breakfast. “Our follicles are at their weakest in the morning post slumber, and need extra protein to repair and boost growth,” Lyons says. Try a smoothie with spirulina. The superfood is 60% protein and a great source of iron, too – also handy because a study by the Cotswold Trichology Centre found that 90% of women who were suffering hair loss also had an iron deficiency. Though doctors don’t all agree upon the connection, it may be worth having

your levels tested. Iron’s thought to be particularly useful in helping with androgenic hair loss as it acts directly upon dihydrotestosterone, which increases alongside testosterone and is known to inhibit the development of hair follicles.

Exercise is also crucial. “Not only does it help regulate cortisol levels, but moderate aerobic exercise triggers the compound called ‘sex hormone binding globulin’, which mops up excess insulin and testosterone,” explains Dr Gerard Conway, endocrinologist at University College London.

As a more direct method of hormone regulation, your GP could put you on the Pill. “An Australian study found you can suppress testosterone in women and allow some hair regrowth using certain forms of the Pill, like Dianette, Cilest and Yasmin, which are higher in oestrogen,” advises Lyons.

Though there’s no miracle cure to hair loss, what we do know is that time is the game-changer. It may take some significant life changes and up to six months to see any kind of regrowth. Take a before picture at the start of your trial, and one for each consecutive month after. “Changes in hair growth are small, but have a cumulative effect. Keeping a record will show you are making progress,” says Ellery.

Don’t despair. There are loads of products that can help in the meantime (see some of my faves, below). And remember, as hard as it may be, that beauty and self-esteem isn’t all tied up in your hair. I’d also advise you stay away from boys called Robert Jones.

WH GIVES YOU THE LOW-DOWN ON HOW TO

1 ASSESS YOUR SCALP HEALTH

A vital key for hair growth is creating an ideal environment for it to thrive in. Aveda Healthy Hair Clinic can help. Advanced creative director Michael Lendon says they use a camera with 600% magnification. “It focuses on your scalp health and gets to the root of how your hair loss is affected.” PS. It’s free.

2 BOOST VOLUME



L'Oréal Elvive Fibrology Thickening Shampoo, £2.99
Fattens up each shaft with keratin.



Nanogen Thickening Hair Fibres, £18.95 Binds to your hair, increasing its volume instantly.

BOOST YOUR HAIR – AND YOUR CONFIDENCE

3 REVIVE AT THE ROOT



Trevor Sorbie Rejuvenate Scalp Serum, £9.99
Uses collagen for hair nutrition.



L'Oréal Professionnel Serioxyl, £40
Stimulates the hair ‘bulb’ for effective growth.

4 NOURISH AND GROW



Philip Kingsley PK4 Hair Soya Protein Capsules, £24 Giving hair’s growth cycle a boost for strength.



Imedeem Hair & Nails, £23.99
Packed with vitamin B2 and B12 to maintain healthy cells. **WH**

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