

What about gluten? I am curious about gluten-free diets. Is it going to help me?

A panel of cicatricial alopecia experts answered this question during the 2016 Patient Conference in New Orleans, LA. We've adapted their answers to create this tip sheet on diets and supplements in patients with scarring alopecia.

Melissa Piliang, MD: I think anytime you're talking about cutting out whole food groups, be it gluten and associated carbohydrates, meat if you're a vegetarian, or a low fat diet, you have to be very careful you don't get a nutritional deficiency because nutrition is so important in hair growth. Hair requires a lot of blood flow and nutrients to grow. If your body senses it's short on nutrients, hair is the first thing that goes, and you can get a telogen shed, maybe unrelated to your scarring alopecia but it's still going to make your hair thinner. You have to be cautious. I get asked 5 times a day about going gluten-free. It's certainly the new kind of fad, but there's no evidence to support that it helps your hair if you don't have Celiac disease or other associated problems. Now processed foods, sugar and those kinds of things, maybe those are pro-inflammatory, although we don't totally know. If you feel that you want to limit something, then cutting out processed foods like chips, crackers, and focusing on whole freshly prepared foods is probably the best way to go. Or the Mediterranean diet, where you're eating a good, healthy, balanced diet with good, healthy fats, lean protein, beans, nuts and fruits, and vegetables.

Let's talk about dairy products, those inflammatory things, night shade vegetables, paleo diet, healthy fats vs. unhealthy fats, the anti-inflammatory diet, turmeric and cinnamon?

Jeff Donovan, MD, PhD: I can mention night shades. I didn't know about night shades until my patients told me about it, but for some reason I have a large number of patients that have been on night-shade-free diets. Night shades are vegetables/foods that grow in the dark (e.g., carrots, other root vegetables, eggplant, potatoes, beets, etc.). I've had 6 or 7 patients not on any other changes in their treatment follow a night-shade free diet, and I was quite interested in this because of their dedication to this diet. It didn't really have any change of 7 people.

What about turmeric?

Jeff Donovan, MD, PhD: Turmeric is really fascinating, though. Turmeric is a spice, which is challenging to get in a standardized quantity. You can get turmeric pills, turmeric powder at stores that sell it in massive bin quantities. I've had a number of patients generously using turmeric by sprinkling it on foods. Some have suggested there may have been a change. Now it's not a study, it's pure anecdotal. I do think turmeric is interesting and does merit further study. Some patients are using a whole lot of turmeric in their foods and others using small capsules doses, but it is an interesting one.

Wilma Bergfeld, MD: The orthopedic surgeons are using turmeric for inflammatory arthritis, and they feel it's helpful.

Melissa Piliang, MD: There is data on psoriasis that turmeric helps, that it's anti-inflammatory. The challenge is, I don't know how it is in Toronto [directed in response to Jeff Donovan's comment], but to get in good quantities so like in studies with psoriasis it was 3 grams a day, that's a huge dose. My husband happens to have mild psoriasis and saw an article in one of my journals and wanted to try it, so he was taking 6 pills in morning, 6 pills at night. It's a challenge to get the right dose in. He got tired of it after a while and stopped.

Lynne Goldberg, MD: A comment was it can also thin your blood. There might be surgeons that might tell you to avoid that a week or so before if you are having a procedure.

Yolanda Lenzy, MD: I do talk to my patients about diet and I use the recommendation of cardiovascular health because we know those are well studied. What's good for your body is also good for your hair. Eat blueberries and antioxidants, different colored peppers, and all those types of things we know have good affects for your cardiovascular health. I say it certainly can't hurt you. Foods, not different supplements, but foods that have those things. It could only help.

Wilma Bergfeld, MD: When you think about hair growth you also need to think about the amount of protein you're in taking. The CDC recommends 40 grams per day. For hair growth, it should probably be 60-80 grams. Of our patient population, one question asked of someone losing hair, it doesn't matter what kind, do you eat red meat? Because most nutrients are in red meat. Of course, if you get prime red meat, there's a lot of fat in that so you need choice or standard or low fat meats like flank steak. The nutrients in red meat are best.

Melissa Piliang, MD: One other nutrient that is an antioxidant that I have recommended to some of my patients is CoQ10, which is marketed for the heart and cardiovascular health. It is an antioxidant, and there's probably oxidative stress that's part of the scarring alopecias. You can get it in many forms over-the-counter.

Wilma Bergfeld, MD: Again the orthopods—my husband's an orthopedic surgeon—the orthopods have studied this, and the CoQ10 reduces female hand arthritis.

Melissa Piliang, MD: CoQ10 200mgs a day.

Antonella Tosti, MD: If I could just say, after Lynne showed the chicken inside the cage, I always suggest my patients to buy organic meat.

Lynne Goldberg, MD: Yes, my husband and I buy organic produce and cage-free eggs.