

The Silent Sorority of Balding Women

By Dottie Enrico Newsday Hair-replacement company looks at market of 20 million females U.S. Consumers are used to seeing ads for vaginal yeast infection medicines followed by 30-second plugs for cheese puffs. That's why it's hard to believe there's a market of 20 million women out there that isn't being tapped simply because its concerns are too sensitive and complicated for most companies to address. That market is the silent sorority of women experiencing severe hair loss. For many years, TV magazines in newspapers and transit posters have carried ads for hair-replacement companies targeting men almost exclusively. Recently a few have started to advertise to women, but if SY Sperling can get a few balding women to go public with their stories, experts say female hair loss could become the "recovery story" of the '90s. "The number of women experiencing hair loss has increased more than 40 percent over the past 25 years," said Douglas Altchek, assistant clinical professor in the department of dermatology at Mount Sinai School of Medicine. And if anyone can bring hair loss to the masses, it's Sy Sperling of Hair Club for Men. Sperling (who's not just the Hair Club president; he's also a client) said he'd like to start a club for women. He said he has been getting an increasing number of calls from women who are suffering from hair loss, but he's still looking for women who'd be willing to appear in his talking-head testimonials. "If I could find a group of women who would be willing to go public with their hair loss and would tell their stories, I'd love to start a club for women," Sperling said. Many consumer have wondered how Sy's strand-by-strand method and his hairpieces differ from your average, everyday rug. There is, evidently, a difference. The Hair Club products, along with many of the products for women, are actually custom-designed hairpieces that can be worn for weeks at a time. As the ads say, you can swim in it, water-ski in it and even let your perky gal pal blow-dry it — no one ever needs to know it isn't your own hair! Interestingly enough, although hair loss is on the rise, the number of wigs sold in the United States is declining, according to number provided by the American Hair Loss Council in Tyler, Texas. Sperling said his men's club, which has more than 30 outlets in the United States, already has a few female members, but he said working with female clients poses unique problems. "It's a very different kind of situation with women," Sperling said. "Many of the hairstyles for women are more complicated and some women are much fussier about their cuts and how closely the hair matches their own." The Hair Club, along with other companies that sell hair-replacement systems, said that in the next few years, most of its growth (no pun intended) will come from women. According to Sperling, the men's market is becoming saturated. Altchek said many factors contribute to the astounding increase in the number of women losing their hair. He believes stress and its effects on hormones might have a part in it. "If you look at the lifestyle changes women have had, namely growing pressure in the workplace and at home, you see how stress and hormonal changes might increase," he said. But cosmetic hair replacements, like custom-designed hairpieces, weaving, transplants and even scalp surgery — doctors literally cut out or cover bald areas during this procedure — are often the last resort for sufferers. Many women first seek advice from their dermatologist. Upjohn, the pharmaceutical house based in Kalamazoo, Mich., that markets Rogaine, the topical minoxidil treatment that can sometimes promote regrowth of hair, has upped the ante in the male-female hair-loss market. Since the FDA approved its use for men in 1988, the company has hit the airwaves with a direct message about hair loss: Take action against balding! The company applied for approval of a formulation for women in 1989, and many experts think sales for the women's product could exceed the \$115 million in U.S. sales generated by the men's version. "We're hearing that the success rate among women is even better than the hair growth shown in men," Altchek said. Altchek said Upjohn is telling dermatologist that about 15 percent of the women who use Rogaine are showing significant regrowth, vs. 10 percent of the men. The truth is that many women who have tried cortisone shots directly into the scalp, Rogaine and a slew of hocus-pocus remedies often are left with one grim reality: Their hair loss is irreversible, so it's time to take cosmetic measures. Felicia, 30, of Massapequa, N.Y., is one of the women unwilling to try Rogaine, and her story is typical of many female sufferers. "I didn't want to try it because it seemed like a risk," she said. "I wanted my full head of hair back." Felicia suffered from androgenetic alopecia, commonly called female pattern baldness. She suspected she was losing her hair when she was 17 and for the next 13 years, Felicia said she became increasingly obsessed with the problem. "I would not go to parties (if I knew it was being held outdoors and it was a windy day," she recalls. "I would never go to the beach for fear someone would get my hair wet. If I would go to a house, restaurant or diner, I would scope out the lighting to make sure I was not sitting where the light would shine on my head. I felt like a victim of circumstance and I would isolate myself from others." At one point, Felicia's frustration over her hair loss became so severe that she and her husband almost considered a divorce. Finally Felicia responded to an ad placed by Jo Ann Passeggio saying her hair replacement consultations were done for women by a woman. Passeggio, who operates two shops in New York City and Long Island called JoJo Concepts Hair Designs, said she decided to target women once she realized how many had the problem. She is full of stories about women who are so afraid of confronting their hair loss that they don't even discuss it with their husbands. "It was very gratifying to see how this could change their lives," she said. "I think men are sensitive about hair loss, but women can be devastated by it." Initial hair loss can be modified with scalp coloration at Naturally You — 952-881-5008. —Star Tribune July 22, 1991