Analysis of various factors responsible for hair loss and awareness level in Delhi and the National Capital Region of India

Archana Aggarwal, Rakhi Gupta*, Navtha Thukral, Gargi Nandi and Garima Bora

Zoology Department, Mataireyi College, University of Delhi, Delhi 110 021, India

The aim of this study was to assess the prevalence, causes and awareness about various factors related to hair loss in subjects of Delhi and the National Capital Region of India. A survey-based study was conducted with 380 participants. Total dissolved solids level of water samples used for hair wash was also analysed. Majority of subjects (96.5%) were affected with hair loss. High percentage of subjects were unaware about the role of diet (94%), iron content (77.65%), hormonal level (89.92%) and genetic factors (93.19%) with respect to hair loss. Persistent, long-term hair loss is an indicator of some disturbance in physiological or environmental factors. Therefore, it is imperative to generate awareness among the population at regular intervals.

Keywords: Genetic factors, hair loss, hormones, iron deficiency, total dissolved solids.

Hair loss or alopecia is one of the most common distressing disorders experienced by people of all age groups characterized by sudden or gradual decline in hair density from the head and other bodily parts. Earlier a high percentage of individuals used to experience hair loss by the age of fifty. However, recently due to lifestyle changes and other factors, many start to see the first sign of hair loss in their adolescence. This widespread nature of hair loss is caused by several factors, which vary among individuals and could be temporary or long-lasting. Factors associated with sudden hair loss are illness, medications, dietary habits or childbirth, while gradual hair loss is usually associated with severe distress, workload and depression. The pathophysiological factors involved in hair loss are genetic disorders, endocrine abnormalities, drug intake, nutritional deficiencies, fungal infections and auto-immune disorders. Most people are unaware that hormonal imbalance and iron deficiency are the most common causes of hair loss. However, the extent to which these contribute to hair loss is still unclear. Exposure to increasing levels of air pollution, including particulate matter, dust, smoke, sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, ammonia and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) causes ‘sensitive scalp syndrome’ leading to hair loss. Stress caused by excessive use of hair dryers, hair dyes, hot curlers, hair straightening products, and chemical-laden cosmetics causes decline in the general health of hair (brittle, dry and thin hair) and ultimately hair loss.

Among the various internal and external factors contributing to hair loss, the quality of water used for hair washing is important in determining the degree of hair loss. Long-term use of water having high levels of positively charged minerals like magnesium, silica, iron and calcium weakens the hair follicles, roots and shafts, leading to dryness, thinning and hair loss.

Therefore, it is important to study the various factors associated with hair loss at regular intervals and generate awareness, as this problem is affecting a high percentage of individuals across the globe. Thus, the present study was undertaken to assess the same from different regions of Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR) of India using questionnaire-based survey.

The study was conducted with 380 (70% female, 30% male) randomly selected subjects belonging to different age groups (10–80 years), residing in Delhi and NCR during June to September 2018. Thirteen samples were excluded from the further study who answered the first question negative and the final study was conducted with 367 samples. All the participants were assured of confidentiality. Only willing participants were included in the study after receiving a written consent.

A uniform questionnaire was designed with 34 close-ended questions for obtaining information about the occupational status, lifestyle stress, dietary habits, general health, hormonal level and various other factors which directly or indirectly contribute to hair loss among the subjects. The level of awareness with respect to hair loss and its causes was also determined through the study.

Water samples (tap water/groundwater) used for hair washing were collected for measuring total dissolved solids (TDS) level using a TDS metre.

Data collected were compiled, and analysed using percentage statistics. Among the 380 subjects surveyed, 96.58% (n = 367) showed high prevalence of hair loss irrespective of their place of residence, gender and occupation (Table 1). Data collected showed that subjects residing in Faridabad and Gurugram experienced marginally low percentage of hair loss (87.96% ± 5.815%, n = 108) compared to those residing in Delhi (100%, n = 207) and Noida and Ghaziabad (100%, n = 65). It was observed that compared to non-working subjects (94.88% ± 2.80%, n = 241), the percentage of working subjects (job or business) experiencing hair loss was high (100, n = 126). Further, maximum number of subjects experienced first signs of hair loss at an early age, viz. 10–20 years (35.69%, n = 131) and 20–30 years (48.77%, n = 179).

Among the 367 subjects, a high percentage (67.58, n = 248) was suffering from gradual hair loss (Table 2).

*For correspondence. (e-mail: rakhi.guptazd@gmail.com)
Table 1. Socio-demographic conditions and their association with hair loss (figures in parentheses indicate percentage)

| Parameters                          | Delhi | Faridabad and Gurugram | Noida and Ghaziabad | Total |
|-------------------------------------|-------|------------------------|---------------------|-------|
| Sample size                         | n = 207 | n = 108                | n = 65              | n = 380 |
| Gender                              |       |                        |                     |       |
| Male                                | 67 (32.36) | 25 (23.14)           | 22 (33.84)         | 114 (30) |
| Female                              | 140 (67.63) | 83 (76.85)           | 43 (66.15)         | 266 (70) |
| Occupational status                 |       |                        |                     |       |
| Working, affected                   | 64 (30.91) | 35 (32.40)           | 27 (41.54)         | 126 (100 = 126/126) |
| Working, not affected               | –     |                        | –                  | –     |
| Non-working, affected               | 143 (69.08) | 63 (58.33)           | 38 (58.46)         | 241 (94.88 = 241/254) |
| Non-working, not affected           | –     | 13 (12.04)            | –                  | 13 (5.12 = 13/254) |
| Subjects affected by hair loss       | 207 (100) | 95 (87.96)           | 65 (100)           | 367 (96.57) |
| Age (years) at which hair loss started |       |                       |                     |       |
| 10–20                               | 94 (45.41) | 8 (8.42)             | 29 (44.61)         | 131 (35.69) |
| 21–30                               | 78 (37.68) | 77 (81.05)           | 24 (36.92)         | 179 (48.77) |
| 31–40                               | 27 (13.04) | 10 (10.52)          | 9 (13.84)          | 46 (12.53) |
| 41–50                               | 0 (0)   | 0 (0)                | 3 (4.61)           | 3 (0.82) |
| 51–60                               | –      | –                    | –                  | –     |
| 61–70                               | –      | –                    | –                  | –     |
| 71–80                               | 8 (3.86) | –                    | –                  | 8 (2.18) |
| n                                   | 207   | 95                   | 65                 | 367   |

Table 2. Pattern of hair loss (figures in parentheses indicate percentage)

| Parameters                              | Delhi (n = 207) | Faridabad and Gurugram (n = 95) | Noida and Ghaziabad (n = 65) | Total (n = 367) |
|-----------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------|
| How rapid was hair loss at the start?   |                 |                                 |                              |                |
| Gradual                                 | 134 (64.73)     | 78 (82.10)                      | 36 (55.38)                   | 248 (67.58)    |
| Sudden                                  | 59 (28.50)      | 17 (17.89)                      | 29 (44.61)                   | 105 (28.61)    |
| Do not know                             | 14 (6.76)       | –                               | –                            | 14 (3.81)      |
| Are your hair                           |                 |                                 |                              |                |
| Breaking off                            | 103 (49.75)     | 24 (25.26)                      | 35 (53.84)                   | 162 (44.14)    |
| Coming out with root attached           | 103 (49.75)     | 71 (74.73)                      | 30 (46.15)                   | 204 (55.59)    |
| Both                                    | 1 (0.48)        | 0                               | 0                            | 1 (0.29)       |
| Does the problem get aggravated in specific weather |     |                                 |                              |                |
| Yes                                     | 97 (46.85)      | 49 (51.57)                      | 34 (52.30)                   | 180 (49.05)    |
| No                                      | 104 (50.24)     | 46 (48.42)                      | 31 (47.69)                   | 181 (49.32)    |
| Do not know                             | 6 (2.89)        | 0 (0)                           | 0 (0)                        | 6 (1.63)       |

More than half (55.58%, n = 204) of the subjects reported that their hair came out with root attached, a condition detrimental to the regrowth of new hair. However, it was reported that in almost half (49.32%, n = 181) of the subjects, the severity of hair loss was not associated with changing weather and remained persistent throughout the year.

It is indispensable to underline the role of chemical treatment in terms of shampoo used and proper diet with respect to hair loss. With this objective, subjects were questioned to check their awareness level and importance of appropriate shampoo depending on hair type and its impact on hair loss. It was found that only 46.86% (n = 172) participants changed shampoo after experiencing hair loss and a significant number among them (50%, n = 86) was relieved (Table 3). An overwhelming majority (70.57%, n = 259) of subjects surveyed had never chemically coloured their hair. Similarly, 75.74% (n = 278) surveyed subjects had never applied heat treatment to their hair (Table 4).

With regard to proper diet and nutrition, majority of participants (93.73%, n = 344) were not following any particular diet and only 5.99% (n = 22) of the participants began to take special diet in terms of higher protein intake (pulses and meat) and green vegetables for relief. When they were cross-questioned regarding decline in hair loss after intake of special diet, only 31.81% (n = 7) gave positive response (Table 3).

When participants were asked about physical appearance of hair, 32.42% (n = 119) responded that they had thin and rough hair while 22.61% had rough and thick hair (n = 83) (Table 5). To interpret the impact of water...
quality used for hair washing the subjects were questioned about the type of water used. It was found that a majority of subjects used tap water for hair washing (92.64%, n = 340). Besides the fact that a high percentage of subjects (85.01, n = 312) were aware about of the role of water in hair loss, only one subject attempted to switch the water used for hair washing. Further, TDS level of water was measured and it was concluded that 267 samples had TDS level below 500 ppm while for 71 samples it was higher than 900 ppm. According to the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the permissible limit for TDS is 500 ppm.

Hair loss is associated with various factors, and abnormality or disturbance in any of these factors causes the disorder. It is important to assess the awareness level of studied subjects regarding these factors, as a cure is possible only when an underlying factor is known (Table 6). With this aim, subjects were questioned whether their iron and hormonal levels had been checked. Only 22.34% (n = 82) and 10.08% (n = 37) subjects opted for quantitative analysis of iron and hormonal levels in the blood respectively. It was observed that subjects from Faridabad and Gurugram were more cautious about hair loss and opted for laboratory test. It was analysed that a significantly low (6.81%, n = 25) number of subjects were aware about the fact that hair loss could be a result of genetic factors.

It is interesting to note that all 367 subjects had some problem with the scalp, as 69.75% (n = 256) participants were suffering with clinical conditions like burning or itching of the scalp, while the remaining 39.50% (n = 145) of the subjects had dandruff or flakes on the scalp (Table 7). Only 14.44% (n = 53) of the subjects were concerned about hair loss and consulted a medical practitioner.

Hair loss affects both males and females, leading to decline in hair density and in some cases, baldness.
Table 5. Physical appearance of hair and its co-relation with hardness of water (figures in parentheses indicate percentage)

| Parameters                  | Delhi ($n = 208$) | Faridabad and Gurugram ($n = 95$) | Noida and Ghaziabad ($n = 65$) | Total ($n = 367$) |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------|
| Texture of hair             |                   |                                   |                               |                  |
| Thick                       | 7 (3.38)          | 4 (4.21)                          | 4 (6.15)                      | 15 (4.08)        |
| Rough and thick             | 62 (29.95)        | 28 (29.47)                        | 29 (44.61)                    | 119 (32.42)      |
| Silk and thick              | 35 (16.90)        | 33 (34.73)                        | 1 (1.53)                      | 69 (18.80)       |
| Rough and thick             | 53 (25.60)        | 9 (9.47)                          | 21 (32.30)                    | 83 (22.61)       |
| Silk and thin               | 50 (24.15)        | 21 (22.10)                        | 10 (15.38)                    | 81 (22.07)       |
| What is the source of water for hair-washing? |                   |                                   |                               |                  |
| Tap water                   | 189 (91.30)       | 93 (97.89)                        | 58 (89.23)                    | 340 (92.64)      |
| Groundwater                 | 18 (8.69)         | 2 (2.10)                          | 7 (10.76)                     | 27 (7.36)        |
| Do you think that hardness of water affects hair loss directly? |                   |                                   |                               |                  |
| Yes                         | 181 (87.43)       | 70 (73.68)                        | 61 (93.84)                    | 312 (85.01)      |
| No                          | 26 (12.56)        | 25 (26.31)                        | 4 (6.15)                      | 55 (14.99)       |
| Have you switched water source to counter hair loss? |                   |                                   |                               |                  |
| Yes                         | 0 (0)             | 1 (1.06)                          | 0 (0)                         | 1                |
| No                          | 207 (100)         | 94 (98.94)                        | 65 (100)                      | 366              |
| If yes, did it help?        |                   |                                   |                               |                  |
| Yes                         | 0                 | 0                                 | 0                             | 0                |
| No                          | 0                 | 1 (100)                           | 0                             | 0                |
| Total dissolved solids level of water used for hair washing |                   |                                   |                               |                  |
| Below 100                   | 41 (19.80)        | 12 (12.63)                        | 0 (0)                         | 53 (14.44)       |
| 100–300                     | 120 (57.97)       | 44 (46.31)                        | 0 (0)                         | 164 (44.69)      |
| 300–500                     | 32 (15.45)        | 17 (17.89)                        | 1 (1.53)                      | 50 (13.62)       |
| 500–700                     | 7 (3.38)          | 16 (16.84)                        | 0 (0)                         | 23 (6.27)        |
| 700–900                     | 1 (0.48)          | 0 (0)                             | 5 (7.69)                      | 6 (1.63)         |
| Above 900                   | 6 (2.89)          | 6 (6.31)                          | 59 (90.76)                    | 71 (19.35)       |

Table 6. Awareness level of subjects with respect to various causative factors of hair loss (figures in parentheses indicate percentage)

| Parameters                              | Delhi ($n = 207$) | Faridabad and Gurugram ($n = 95$) | Noida and Ghaziabad ($n = 65$) | Total ($n = 367$) |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------|
| Have you ever checked your iron content? |                   |                                   |                               |                  |
| Yes                                     | 37 (17.87)        | 40 (42.10)                        | 5 (7.69)                      | 82 (22.34)       |
| No                                      | 170 (82.12)       | 55 (57.89)                        | 60 (92.30)                    | 285 (77.66)      |
| $n$                                     | 207               | 95                                | 65                            | 367              |
| If yes, whether the iron levels were within range? |                   |                                   |                               |                  |
| Yes                                     | 23 (62.16)        | 32 (80)                           | 2 (40)                        | 57 (69.51)       |
| No                                      | 14 (37.83)        | 8 (20)                            | 3 (60)                        | 25 (30.49)       |
| $n$                                     | 37                 | 40                                | 5                             | 82               |
| Have your hormone levels ever been checked to evaluate hair loss? |                   |                                   |                               |                  |
| Yes                                     | 17 (8.21)         | 15 (15.78)                        | 5 (7.69)                      | 37 (10.08)       |
| No                                      | 190 (91.78)       | 80 (84.21)                        | 60 (92.30)                    | 330 (89.92)      |
| $n$                                     | 207               | 95                                | 65                            | 367              |
| If yes, whether the hormone levels were within range? |                   |                                   |                               |                  |
| Yes                                     | 10 (58.82)        | 10 (66.66)                        | 2 (40)                        | 22 (59.45)       |
| No                                      | 7 (41.17)         | 5 (33.33)                         | 3 (60)                        | 15 (40.54)       |
| $n$                                     | 17                 | 15                                | 5                             | 37               |
| Do you think that it is a genetic disorder? |                   |                                   |                               |                  |
| Yes                                     | 17 (8.21)         | 4 (4.21)                          | 4 (6.15)                      | 25 (6.81)        |
| No                                      | 190 (91.78)       | 91 (95.78)                        | 61 (93.84)                    | 342 (93.19)      |
| $n$                                     | 207               | 95                                | 65                            | 367              |
| If yes, from whom have you probably inherited it? |                   |                                   |                               |                  |
| Father                                  | 12 (70.58)        | 3 (75)                            | 1 (25)                        | 16 (64)          |
| Mother                                  | 5 (29.41)         | 0 (0)                             | 2 (50)                        | 7 (28)           |
| Both                                     | 0                 | 1 (25)                            | 1 (25)                        | 2 (8)            |
| $n$                                     | 17                 | 4                                 | 4                             | 25               |
Various factors causing hair loss are both internal (from enzymes to hormones) as well as external. Earlier hair loss was considered to be an age-related phenomenon. However, at present a high percentage of subjects are experiencing hair loss at an early age between 10 and 20 years (35.69%, n = 131) and 20 and 30 years (48.77%, n = 179). This depicts that hair loss is related to other factors as well. Keeping this in view, further questions were framed to decipher and analyse the various factors contributing to early start of hair loss. It has been reported that there is high prevalence of abrupt and short-term hair loss during extreme weather conditions, but gradual hair loss (49.05%, n = 180) throughout the year (49.32%, n = 181) indicates that it is not likely to be a physiological cycle, but a result of external or internal disturbances. Frequent use of shampoos containing synthetic ingredients not only make the hair dry and dull, but also has other side effects in terms of increased hair fall because of the presence of alkanolamides used as a surfactant. It is interesting to note that the maximum number of participants who got relief after changing their shampoo (n = 61) were from Delhi. In cities, hardness of water is the major cause of hair loss. It contains high amounts of magnesium, silica and calcium, which leads to breakage, dryness and thinning of hair. Hard water also results in dandruff and destroys hair follicles and is therefore detrimental to the regrowth of new hair. In the present study, the impact of high dissolved solids on hair loss could not be ascertained as only 100 subjects (27.25%) were using water with TDS level above 500 ppm.

Table 6 shows that majority of subjects were unaware of the role of special diet, iron content, hormonal levels and genetic factors with respect to hair loss. It has been reported that only 6% of the subjects were aware about the role of special diet and proper nutrition. Iron deficiency is the world’s most common nutritional deficiency and is a well-known cause of hair loss. It has been studied that iron works as a cofactor for ribonucleotide reductase, the rate-limiting enzyme for DNA synthesis. Hair follicles are one of the most rapidly dividing cells in our body and ribonucleotide reductase helps in the division and growth of hair follicles. In addition, multiple genes have been identified in human hair follicles regulated by iron.

In males and females, hair loss is androgen- and estrogen-dependent respectively. Dihydrotestosterone (DHT), a more potent form of testosterone in males is synthesized from testosterone by a specific enzyme, 5-alpha reductase. While both testosterone and DHT are known to have a weakening effect on hair follicles, there appears to be something unique about the conversion process of testosterone to DHT that is related to hair thinning. This is why some drugs that are marketed for hair loss block the conversion of testosterone to DHT. In females, hair loss is one of the most common symptoms of polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS). It has been reported that most of the women who have PCOS also suffer from androgenic alopecia. The data collected in the present study depict a low level of awareness among the subjects regarding hormonal level as only 37 subjects had their hormonal levels checked. Along with nutrition and hormonal level, genetic factor is one of the most important internal factors contributing to hair loss. It has been reported that the genetic machinery controls the metabolism of hormones and active substances required for hair growth and proliferation of hair follicles. However, only 6.81% (n = 25) subjects considered this as a plausible cause for hair loss.

According to statistical analysis of data, 69.76% subjects reported itching/burning of scalp, which could be identified as ‘sensitive scalp syndrome’ resulting from exposure to increasing levels of air pollution, including particulate matter, dust, smoke, nickel, lead, arsenic, sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, ammonia and PAHs which settle on the scalp and hair. This could be the reason why non-working people are also experiencing hair loss, as the indoor environment contains volatile organic compounds released from various sources which deposit on the scalp. The pollutants transepidermally migrate to the dermis, thus leading to oxidative stress and hair loss. With such a high prevalence of hair loss, only 14.44% subjects consulted a medical practitioner.

### Table 7. Associated clinical condition and medication for hair loss (figures in parentheses indicate percentage)

| Parameters | Delhi (n = 207) | Faridabad and Gurugram (n = 95) | Noida and Ghaziabad (n = 65) | Total (n = 367) |
|------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------|
| Is there any clinical condition associated with scalp? | | | | |
| Itching/burning | 163 (78.74) | 39 (41.05) | 54 (83.07) | 256 (76.92) |
| Nothing | 44 (21.25) | 56 (58.94) | 11 (16.92) | 111 (23.08) |
| Do you have dandruff or flaking in your scalp? | | | | |
| Yes | 81 (39.13) | 36 (37.89) | 28 (43.07) | 145 (39.51) |
| No | 126 (60.86) | 59 (62.10) | 37 (56.92) | 222 (60.49) |
| Is there any medication you are taking for relief? | | | | |
| Yes | 34 (16.42) | 15 (15.78) | 4 (6.15) | 53 (14.44) |
| No | 173 (83.57) | 80 (84.21) | 61 (93.84) | 314 (85.56) |
| If yes, is there any decrease in hair loss? | | | | |
| Yes | 7 (20.58) | 6 (40) | 0 (0) | 13 (24.53) |
| No | 27 (79.41) | 9 (60) | 4 (100) | 40 (75.47) |

Current Science, Vol. 118, No. 5, 10 March 2020
Thus, the present study shows that the younger population is most affected by hair loss. Lifestyle related stress and pollution are the major factors responsible for hair loss, along with hardness of water which leads to scalp-related problems like dandruff and flaking. Majority of the population was unaware of the contribution of special diet, iron content, hormonal levels and genetic features to hair loss. It is imperative to generate awareness among the population regarding the causative factors, as persistent and long-term hair loss is an indicator of some physiological or environmental disturbances.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT. We thank the Principal, Maitreyi College, Delhi for support and encouragement.

Received 19 September 2019; accepted 31 October 2019
doi: 10.18520/cs/v118/i5/786-791