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GONE TODAY, HAIR TOMORROW?

Many say costly replacement surgery pays off in self-esteem.

By Abe Asmider

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John Fulk was the perfect candidate for hair-replacement surgery: in his 30s; suffering male pattern baldness; wanting to look his best.

"You can't put a price on self-esteem," said the 33-year-old Terre Haute bricklayer. "The way you get up every morning and look at yourself in the mirror really determines what kind of day you're going to have."

Fulk is one of nearly 20,000 Americans who undergo hair-replacement surgery each year, according to data compiled by the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery.

At a cost of \$3,500 to \$10,000 for a complete treatment, hair-replacement surgery is not cheap, unless perhaps amortized over the remaining lifespan of the patient. But the technique has been improved in recent years, experts say.

In the procedure, hundreds of follicles are taken from donor areas — the sides and back of the man's head, where hair growth typically is lifelong — and transplanted to the crown and top of his head, where male pattern baldness strikes.

Some women also suffer male pattern baldness and are good candidates for the surgery. But, more often than not, balding women will have a more generalized pattern of hair loss (thinning on all areas of the head) and hence will not have a good donor area.

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TRANSPLANT CHOICE

Before and after: Mark Baker of New Castle was photographed in May 2003 before hair-transplant surgery (far left) and last week. Baker has undergone three hair-transplant procedures, the most recent one last year, and says he is pleased with their outcome.

It's a pattern: In male pattern baldness, hair follicles atop the head begin to die, with the hairline receding and hair on the crown thinning, often starting in a man's early 20s. It is caused by hormones and genetic predisposition. In the early stages, Rogaine or Propecia may curb hair loss.



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Newer options include laser therapy and even cloning. In laser surgery, small spots of bald tissue are removed by a pulsating laser; donor tissue from non-balding areas around the sides and back of the head are harvested the old-fashioned way, using a scalpel.

This technique should not be confused with low-level laser therapy, also known as "cold laser," which may lead to minor growth of very fine vellus hair in some patients, says Dr. Paul Wm. Weiss of Hair Restoration Specialists in Indianapolis.

In cloning, hair based on a donor's DNA is grown in a laboratory, and then transplanted to bald areas of the scalp. Currently, only about 7 percent of cloned hair survives transplanting, Weiss says.

Fulk says he was self-conscious about his hair loss before his surgery in January. "You wonder how many people are actually looking at your hair loss, or at your face," he said.

He won't know the results of his transplant, performed by Dr. Mark Hamilton of Hamilton Facial Plastic Surgery, until the summer. But the prognosis typically is good these days.

Insurance agent Mark Baker of New Castle has had three hair transplant "sessions" since June 2002; his most recent was last year, and he believes his treatment is now complete. He's highly satisfied with the results, he says.

"I like people looking at it," said Baker.

Hair

■ Early transplants looked like tufts of 'doll's hair.'

From E1

45. "I encourage it. It's all mine. I don't want them to think it's not my hair."

Hair-replacement surgery was "invented" in Japan in the 1950s, Weiss says. Early procedures involved moving relatively large clumps of scalp with several dozen follicles in each from the donor area of the head to the recipient area. This left significant scarring in the donor area, and gave a "doll's hair" appearance in the recipient area, says Weiss, who himself had hair-replacement surgery in 1969.

"It was so bad I didn't have the procedure done again until 1985," he said.

'Lift' rarely is done now

Another procedure that is now obsolescent is galeoplasty, or "scalp-reduction" surgery, a kind of face-lift for the head. The idea was that parts of the scalp that still had hair would be pulled closer together. Results were mixed, and the look could be unnatural.

Today, most doctors do "follicular unit transplants." A "donor" segment of scalp is removed and broken down into grafts, each with no more than three hair follicles. Then each graft is inserted into a tiny incision in the bald area.

Scarring and recovery time are greatly reduced, and the transplants themselves are barely noticeable, though sometimes the hairline above the forehead may seem artificially drawn.

Tom Brewer liked the results of his 2003 hair-replacement surgery so much he took a part-time job with Advanced Medical Institute, the company that performed the procedure. Brewer, 48, had begun losing his hair in his mid-20s. He works full time as a utility company superintendent.

"I tried all the over-the-counter goos and stuff," he said. "I didn't like the technology 15 years ago. The plugs were as

large as cigarette butts, and you couldn't comb your hair back."

Brewer, a self-described amateur body builder, says he's spent \$13,000 on three separate treatments over the years, but calls that no more than the cost of a good used car.

"It's better to get out of a bad car looking good, then a good car looking bad," he said.

Other treatment choices

Alternatives to surgery do exist, especially Rogaine (generic equivalent is minoxidil) and Propecia (active ingredient is finasteride).

Rogaine comes in ointment form and must be rubbed into the scalp daily. Hair growth is considered relatively modest.

Propecia is taken orally. Originally a treatment for prostate enlargement, it stops hair loss by blocking an enzyme that converts the male hormone testosterone to DHT; it is DHT that is typically blamed for male pattern baldness.

Without daily use of either drug, hair loss returns. Generally, either works better if the patient



Sam Riche / The Star



Inside: A growing number of men who are losing their hair are choosing shaved scalps over surgery, drugs, toupees or weaves. Page E8

Right: Several separated hair follicles (bottom of photo) are ready to be implanted by Dr. Weiss. Because the hairs are the patient's own, there is no need for drugs to prevent rejection.

begins using it shortly after hair loss begins, typically in the 20s.

"Some people get some real hair growth with Propecia," said Hamilton. "It's a step up from Rogaine."

The other traditional alternative is the toupee, or hairpiece. You just cover up the baldness. Frank Sinatra wore a "rug" for years.

The biggest hassle with a toupee is taping it to the scalp. Maintenance and appearance also are issues.

Jack P. Davis wore a toupee for years, and then lost it. It happened as he was riding his motorcycle on U.S. 40 one day several years ago.

"The wind blew my toupee off, and it landed on this lady's windshield," recalled Davis, now 61 and semi-retired. "I turned around and went back to retrieve it, and she was really flustered by me, and I was flustered because it was torn to pieces. The lady was beating it with her pocket book. She thought it was a bird."

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