

BEAUTY breakthrough

BY KHEyrNE DANU

CHILL PILL

A CANCER DIAGNOSIS AND CHOOSING TO UNDERGO CHEMO IS A CHALLENGING PROCESS ON ITS OWN, BUT THE SIDE-EFFECT OF LOSING ONE'S HAIR CAN BE DEVASTATING. HOWEVER, THERE IS A BREAKTHROUGH TREATMENT THAT CAN HELP

The process of chemotherapy is challenging enough, but losing your hair can quickly turn your sensitive private experience into a public event. Recent international research shows that cooling the hair follicles, through cold caps, can potentially help you to keep your hair.

LONGEVITY EDITION X 2015 84

WHAT IS A COLD CAP?

According to the American Cancer Society, scalp hypothermia is the cooling of the scalp with ice packs or cold caps for a period of time before, during and after each chemo treatment. A cold cap is a therapeutic device used to cool the blood vessels in the scalp in a bid to prevent hair loss.

The Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA) explains that while powerful chemotherapy drugs attack rapidly growing cancer cells, they unfortunately also attack other rapidly growing cells in the body, including those in the hair roots. Scalp cooling for the first few hours of chemotherapy can protect the hair roots and prevent the hair from falling out. Near-freezing temperatures reduce blood flow in the scalp, making it harder for cancer-fighting drugs to reach and harm hair follicles.

DO THEY REALLY WORK?

"In my experience, it did work," shares Kerry King from Hout Bay, Cape Town. "I was told that it might not and that, in the end, many women choose not to bother. I am convinced it worked for me. I lost loads of hair, but I never went bald and never needed the wig I had bought."

King was 41, pregnant and living in the UK when she was diagnosed with Stage 2 breast cancer, which had spread to surrounding lymph nodes. For King, the use of cold caps was a straightforward procedure at the UK oncology department.

As many as 50 000 patients worldwide have tried scalp cooling, yet it's still not well known, or offered in most cancer treatment centres. This could be because cold caps didn't work at first, but the mechanics of these devices have improved dramatically over the last decade.

A large meta-analysis of 60 scalp-cooling studies on chemotherapy-induced hair loss was published in the *Expert Review of Dermatology* in 2011. It found that 80% of the patients in the control-free studies did not suffer hair loss. It also found that the number of chemotherapy courses, the admission method and the doses have an influence on the result of scalp cooling. It was evident that optimal fitting of the cap is an important factor for success. Often, bald areas are seen where the cap did not fit properly.

The study found that scalp cooling should not be applied in cases of cold sensitivity, blood cell cancer such as leukaemia or lymphoma, and melanoma patients with adjuvant or curative chemotherapy. The researchers feel that scalp cooling is currently the best method to reduce chemotherapy-induced alopecia (CIA).

STRAY CANCER CELLS

There is concern among oncologists that the use of cold caps could lead to stray cancer cells finding refuge in the cooled blood vessels of the scalp. Dr Charlene Muller, resident oncologist at the GVI Oncology Centre in East London, says: "The main concern is, by reducing the amount of chemotherapy that goes to the scalp, the risk is one that there may be cells remaining there that haven't been affected by the chemotherapy, but as yet the studies done haven't shown any increased risk of that. The FDA in the US still hasn't approved cold caps, but they are currently looking at the safety and effectiveness of them. It is something worthwhile that we should let women know about."

According to *The Asco Post*, Dr Hope Rugo of University College San Francisco, who is leading the current DigniCap study in the US, comments: "It turns out that the risk of metastases to the scalp is extremely low and, as a first event for advanced disease, it is even lower. Mostly, scalp metastases are seen after people have already had metastases to other places in the body, and in total, only about 1,2% of all metastases are found in the scalp."

LONGEVITY EDITION X 2015 85





Lizelle Knott with her family, keeping up a "normal" appearance while under going chemotherapy.



Right: Lizelle today looking fabulous

Left and above: Lizelle wearing her "Cold Cap"



Right: Lizelle's last chemo session



MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Lizelle Knott from East London was first diagnosed with cancer at 16. She underwent chemotherapy for Stage 4 lymphoma and quickly lost all of her hair, a deeply traumatic experience for a teenager. When Knott was diagnosed with breast cancer last year, she was determined to keep her hair, not just for her sake, but also for her toddler son.

"The ability to walk in public and not have people look at me with pity was a major attitude-booster for me," explains Knott. "I was able to just be 'Liz' and decide who I wanted to tell about my cancer. When you're going through chemo, the last thing you want is people staring at you, or looking at you with that 'ah shame' look.

"It also allowed us to keep things reasonably 'normal' at home for our son. He was only 16 months old when I started chemo. We tried to shelter him from as much of the cancer drama as possible. To him, mommy looked like mommy, and that gave me the confidence and motivation to continue fighting. I also still felt like a woman. I honestly believe that saving my hair, and looking reasonably normal, maintained my positive

attitude throughout my chemo."

After seeing Knott's positive experience, Dr Linda Whitelock-Jones, a Port Elizabeth-based breast surgeon, has become an advocate of cold cap use. She notes: "The latest DigniCap research has had fairly impressive results. Losing the hair is one of

the things that women absolutely hate, but it's worth trying cold caps. If it works, it works, and if it doesn't, you haven't lost anything."

For King it was one less thing to worry about, on top of being a new mother. "I am not vain, but I am also not brave and extrovert. I was never going to be that person to jump in and have 10 different-colour wigs, and embrace it. I did buy scarves and a wig, but never had to wear them. It also allowed me to stay under the radar; it was less noticeable that I was ill. I found it hard to cope with people's reactions to me having cancer. I never knew how to handle it when they looked shocked or embarrassed. It might have been harder if I had had no

hair, especially if I had been bald with a newborn. I also think it helped my mindset, which was all over the place at the time. I think I really would

I WAS ABLE TO JUST BE 'LIZ' AND DECIDE WHO I WANTED TO TELL ABOUT MY CANCER

have had the chance to feel like a victim. Having hair kept me on the straight and narrow, really. I had less chance to slide into oblivion."

WHAT TO EXPECT

"It was just like a giant, frozen tea cosy," says King. "It was quite heavy and it has to be tight. They put gauze on the hairline so it's not sitting directly on your skin anywhere. They then strap on a hat, like a soft riding hat, with a chinstrap on top of it to keep it down. I have to say it wasn't a pleasant experience; it's frigging freezing, like sitting with frozen peas on your head. And just when you get used to it, they change it for a fresh one straight from the freezer! There are definitely times when you wish it would stop, but you have to have the mental ability to persevere."

Since cold caps are not common in South Africa, Knott and her husband were left to their own devices. They ordered dry ice and made a mini-freezer out of a cooler box, necessary to get the cap cold enough. Knott tucked cut-up pantyliners under the edge of the cap to prevent her skin from being burned. Her husband dug out his welding gloves to handle the below-freezing caps and dry ice. They then strapped the cap on firmly to make sure every hair follicle was exposed. They had to repeat this process every half an hour, but to Knott,

it was worth every moment.

GVI Oncology centres around the country do have cold caps available for anyone who wishes to try them.

Today Knott is motivated to educate people on the effectiveness of cold cap therapy. She adds: "Since finishing my chemo, and being able to prove that the cold caps work, I've tried hard to get my story out there and encourage others to try them too. I am really hoping the awareness will grow." ■