

Rachel — I have Alopecia, it doesn't have me.

Alopecia intruded on my life unexpectedly and without warning on the day of my youngest son's cowboy themed 1st birthday party. It's difficult to forget how I felt when my first bald patch was discovered by my husband; how was I expected to hide this newfound shame while still trying to deliver my son the best birthday imaginable, all the while being dressed in full cowgirl getup. I wasn't sure what was going on and felt shocked, immediately booking an appointment to see my doctor the next day. My hair has always been big, boofy and there has always been a lot of it – for me to have any type of bald patch was unimaginable.



After going to the doctors it was confirmed that I had Alopecia Areata. I was heartbroken, cranky at the world and in absolute shock. How can something like this happen to me? I didn't even know what Alopecia was. I felt like I was being punished for something and I was so confused. The weeks that followed I attended a specialist doctor who put over 30 needles in my head. At this stage I had 4 large bald patches that were growing bigger every day. At my last appointment the specialist told me that there was nothing further they could do than put me on strong medication and hope for the best. He suggested visiting wig retailers (which I did). I spent those few months with a hurt heart.

In time, my anger eased and I stopped hiding from Alopecia and started embracing the opportunity in front of me. I could have blamed myself, beaten myself up and cried myself to sleep every night. Instead I chose that this was an occasion for me to educate, inspire and advocate; to be the positivity in the struggles of others. I wanted to wholeheartedly accept the idea of 'Healthy Alopecia'.



As though I was a student researching a thesis, I began learning as much as possible about the condition; joining various online support networks, observing the bravery of sufferers who proudly shared their stories. 'One day I'll be able to share my story,' I thought and promised myself that I would not allow my hair (or lack of) to define me.

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I spent a considerable amount of time looking at my diet. I was in no way an unhealthy person but like most, there was ample opportunity to improve and eliminate any unnecessary snacking. Through my endless researching, I stumbled upon the idea of Ketosis and following a Ketogenic Diet, which had helped lessen the symptoms of Autoimmune Disorders in some people. On paper, the idea seemed drastic and it honestly frightened me, but as I looked in the mirror, I realised that this had to be a better option than getting needles in my head for the rest of my life.

With much determination, I removed all traces of sugar and unnecessary carbohydrates from my diet; no more warm choc chip cookies on the lounge, no more icy cold milkshakes at the surf club. This was going to be a challenge. Mentally, I braced myself for the biggest challenge of my life.

I coupled my new diet with a gym membership and began taking dance classes, yoga and anything else that would take my mind off everything, take me out of my comfort zone and fuel my body with positivity. I fully immersed myself into the lifestyle and felt amazing. I helped others with their sugar free lifestyle and educated the children I was teaching about healthy eating and lifestyle changes.

There were dark days. There always is, but thankfully, for every dark day, there was a sliver of light; a hug from a child, a compliment from my husband, a sugar free cookie recipe that wasn't disgusting or the discovery of a soft strand of hair in a place that, months ago, was bald.

It has been a few years since the day I found my first bald patch. I still talk to everyone I can about my journey and pray that I won't discover anymore bald patches. Every time I lose a bit of extra hair when I am brushing I hold my breath and check for a bald patch, relieved when there is nothing else there. But it taught me that I am more than my hair, it taught me a new way of living a healthy lifestyle, and it taught me that I am surrounded by support and love.

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