

Katie — I'm working at being more open and accepting of it

By Katie

When I was in Year 1, or about six years old, Mum noticed a few bare spots on my scalp when she was doing my hair for school. I remember she seemed confused, and maybe even a bit cross—at first she thought I'd pulled it out myself, or that my brother had pulled it out when we were fighting. But we went to see our GP and that's the first time I heard the words alopecia areata. To be honest, I didn't really know what was going on, I just knew that I had to go and see a new doctor—a dermatologist—who confirmed it was AA and sent us home with some lotion that Mum rubbed on my bare patches.

No one in my family had ever heard of alopecia before, even though my aunty was a hairdresser. For quite a while it didn't make that much of a difference to my life: Mum would part my hair in different spots, and do pigtails or topknots in different ways to cover any bare scalp. The patches would come and go, and when they got bigger we started using a bit of mascara on my scalp too. We saw the dermatologist a lot and tried a range of lotions and ointments. Some of them stung a bit or a lot, and some smelt bad. Mum took me to 'alternative' doctors too, and we tried a few different diets and vitamins that they said would work, but aside from making me grumpy because I had to eat weird bread and swallow tablets which I had a bit of a phobia about. The worst was when I had cortisone injections in my scalp. That hurt so much: I remember crying heaps, and Mum was crying too. We tried all sorts of treatments, but the patches kept coming and going.

Year 4 and Year 5 were great years, my hair grew long and I was really happy. But then in Year 7 it started to fall out again, and quicker than before. The patches were too big to cover with mascara any more, and I started wearing wider and wider headbands. Kids in my class got suspicious about the fact that I always had a headband on, they started making fun of me and persistently asking questions, even the people I thought were my friends. A few tried to grab my headband off in class, which was really awful.



Katie — I finally worked up the confidence to tell my close friends

I was scared all the time that someone would see or guess what was under the headband, and that they would think I was weird. So starting high school was really hard. I was too nervous to tell even my closest friends the truth, and I felt really alone. It made me even quieter in class than I had been, and I stopped playing sports like basketball and swimming that I'd loved before, because I didn't want to chance people noticing something strange.

It was really hard to accept that alopecia wasn't going to just go away, and making the move to wear a wig was really difficult. But once I'd done it, I felt heaps better about things. Sure, I was still a bit nervous that it might slip, but it felt good to be able to throw those stupid headbands out once and for all! And when I made contact with an older girl with AA who also wore a wig (and made me feel comfortable making the step to get one in the first place), she told me how accepting her friends had been when she told them, I finally worked up the confidence to tell my close friends. It felt so good to share with other people, and it was reassuring to hear them say it made no difference to our friendship and that they would do exactly the same thing if it was them who was losing hair.

I'm still pretty careful who I tell about my alopecia, but I'm working at being more open and accepting of it. Anyone I have ever shared with has been super supportive, so I know it doesn't make a difference to people who are my friends and care about me. Having the confidence to tell others made it possible for me to have sleepovers again, to travel with friends, and get back into sport: I ditched rowing because of the early mornings, but I still enjoying walking, the occasional gym or dance class and yoga. For now, I certainly feel most confident when I'm wearing my wig, and lots of people actually compliment me on what beautiful hair I have! But I'm not afraid to leave my wig off around the people I trust and love, and I'm finding ways to keep my body and mind healthy and happy.

