

Olivia — Fortunately, I am one of the lucky ones.

In March 2017 I started to lose my eyelashes. At first I thought it was a reaction to starting a new arthritis medication that was a mild type of a chemotherapy drug, however by mid April they hadn't grown back, and my eyelashes were starting to thin out.

In May, I started to lose hair on my head, my crown no longer covered in hair, but sporting a large bald spot. My hairline had started to thin out too, until my usual centre parted hairstyle was so wide that it looked like I had a triangle shaved into the front of it.



I was so insecure about it, no eyelashes, no eyebrows and more hair falling out each day. My dermatologist diagnosed me with Alopecia Areata, and injected steroids into my eyebrow area and scalp to try and promote hair growth. Of all the needles and injections I've had over the past few years, these are the ones that by far hurt the most.

After a lot of appointments I found out that this autoimmune disease can be triggered and worsened with hormonal change, and in May I was incredibly emotionally hormonal - my Nan, my great grandmother, passed away. I always felt so close to her, and losing her so suddenly did not help my immune system.

My family were always sensitive about my hair loss, however my Grandmother took longer to actually realise the full extent of the disease. Despite telling her that I had an actual autoimmune condition that was worsening, she just didn't seem to understand. It wasn't until July, when it was clearly obvious to anyone that saw my from behind that I had no hair, that she asked my mother why I have no hair. Having her finally see what I was facing made it all the more real for me, which I did not expect.

Losing my hair was by far worse than having arthritis. Long eyelashes, silky hair and thick neat eyebrows are tied to femininity, and it felt like I was losing mine more and more every day.

I had some very down times, I considered just chopping off all of my remaining hair (which I am so glad today that I didn't do). I started wearing beanies to school, hats everywhere out in public, finding ways to style my hair to hide the bald patches as much as I could.

Fortunately, I am one of the lucky ones. For me the creams and injections that I had worked, and today I have almost all of my hair back, besides one small spot on my head that is still getting injections in it to try and promote regrowth.

There is a distinct difference between the newly grown hair and my old hair, most obvious (other than the difference in length) is that it is growing in with a new texture than the rest, it's a lot more frizzy and uncontrollable.

Olivia — I send them, and anyone else going through a tough time, all my love

In March 2018, I did once again lose my eyelashes, and thankfully they have once again grown back. As I said, I still get injections in my scalp every now and then, and they are work well for me.

Last week, on September 13th, it was 'r u ok day' and it reminded me of last year, when asked that question at school. I did make a joke and say that I'm always 'OK', which took people longer than I thought to figure out, seeing as people only really knew me as Liv, not Olivia, a few silent minutes before they realised that 'OK' is my initials. However, if I was to be honest, I wasn't really okay. I'd lost my hair, was in pain from arthritis and trying to finish year 12.

Today, I have my eyelashes and eyebrows back, I only have a small patch missing on my scalp, and am managing my arthritis better than ever. I'm still nowhere near as healthy or as well as I could be, but I'm managing. I'm enjoying University (mostly) and am so, so excited to be spending a few weeks in the sunshine soon.

Writing and talking about this is also by far harder than talking about my arthritis, and it's taken me a long time to finish writing this. I was encouraged by the videos and stories of Zach Kornfeld from 'The Try Guys' and his ability to speak out about his experiences with an invisible illness.

While arthritis is an invisible illness, alopecia is not an invisible illness (for the most part), and I think that the only way I will be able to get the constant fear of losing my hair again out of my mind is by talking about it more, making myself more aware of what my biological and physical triggers are, keeping a (reasonably) close eye on any changes or extra hair loss that might take place. I've managed to work myself into a catastrophic state over normal amounts of 'shedding' because the panic of seeing my hair fall out on clumps again is always there.

I will find a way to stop this anxiety, it's just a matter of time and effort.

I know that there are people who will never see their hair grow back, or have hair because of other reasons, and I send them, and anyone else going through a tough time, all my love and hope that you can see a light at the end of the tunnel. Even if it's dim and far away, it's there.

