

### ***What's the Problem with Propecia?***

For centuries, a cure for hair loss was pursued with no success. However, that changed when a young endocrinologist at Cornell University, Dr. Julianne Imperato-McGinley, published her research on a group of young boys and men in the Dominican Republic that did not exhibit physical male traits, namely a penis and testes, until puberty. Imperato-McGinley noted that this phenomenon was due to an absence in the boys' bodies of an enzyme that's needed to convert testosterone into dihydrotestosterone, the hormone and sex steroid critical to male development. The other notable feature of this group was that, as they matured through adulthood, their prostates remained small and *they didn't lose any hair*. This discovery led to the advent, in 1997, of a new hair-loss drug called Propecia from pharmaceutical giant Merck; a drug touted as a miracle pill that would not only prevent balding, but could also regrow lost hair. It seemed that the centuries-old search for a panacea to thinning tresses had finally arrived.

Fast-forward two decades and controversy is swirling around finasteride, a drug used to treat both benign prostatic hyperplasia (enlarged prostate) (5 mg) and androgenic alopecia (male pattern baldness) (1 mg), and sold and prescribed under the brand names Proscar and Propecia, respectively. An ever-growing list of severe side effects, many of which are long-lasting and possibly permanent even after cessation of treatment, read like something out of a nightmare:: overall sexual dysfunction (SD); erectile dysfunction (ED); loss of libido; depression; suicidal ideation; anxiety; panic attacks; insomnia; and cognitive dysfunction.<sup>[1]</sup> Additional adverse effects that men impacted by finasteride find themselves grappling with include penile shrinkage and testicular pain; muscle atrophy; weight gain; vision problems; joint pain; emotional anhedonia (flatness/lack of emotions); skin disorders such as rosacea, dryness, dandruff, and atrophy; the growth of breast tissue and an increased susceptibility to breast cancer; and, ironically, a rare and very aggressive form of prostate cancer. Incredibly, not only is Propecia, the brand name for the 1 mg finasteride pill used in the treatment of androgenetic alopecia, still on the market, it continues to be widely prescribed and easily obtained.

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[1] <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11930-018-0161-6>

## The Nightmare Begins- Introduction

*“Discontinuation of the drug should actually make the hormones work again...but apparently, something breaks down in some men, in the prostate, in the brain, in the whole organism.” - Michael Zitzmann, MD, andrology professor at the University of Munster, Germany*

Imagine you're a successful, intelligent and virile 40-something year-old man. Your career in IT is well-established; you've got a beautiful wife and two healthy children. To say life is good is an understatement.

Now imagine you notice your hair is beginning to thin. It's ever so slight, but it's there. The temples are wispiers; there's a patch at your crown that is increasingly translucent in the sun. It's a perfectly natural and normal part of aging. Still, it bothers you. You feel young and you want to look the way you feel. After all, you live in the Golden State-- home of Hollywood-- where growing old is fiercely combatted.

But wait.

There's a solution. Your doctor tells you about a small pink pill called Propecia. He explains that it is the conversion of testosterone to DHT that is causing your hair loss. And Propecia, the brand name for the drug finasteride, effectively blocks the enzyme that allows this conversion, thus stopping male pattern hair loss. Side effects? Nothing permanent. A slight loss in libido while taking the pill is the most common sexual side

effect, but only about 2% of the millions of men who take the drug will experience this. Even then, he reassures you, any sexual side effects disappear upon cessation of the drug.

It seems too good to be true.

*And that's because it is.*

After a few months, you notice your libido is waxing and waning. Morning erections and spontaneous erections aren't happening any longer. Thing is, you aren't losing any more hair and, though it might be psychosomatic, you feel like some of your hair may actually be returning, so you're not too worried. After all, the negative sexual symptoms will go away if you choose to stop taking the drug. You've been assured as much by medical professionals and Merck's own Propecia leaflets that came with the pills.

Your health continues to worsen. Add anxiety, depression, IBS, and sleep issues to the mix. Insomnia is now your nocturnal companion. The career you've been in for years is suddenly challenging due to a brain fog that never lifts. When even finding the words to finish a sentence becomes difficult, you decide that enough is enough. Your marriage is strained and the decline in your health is no longer worth the cosmetic benefit of keeping your hair, so you stop taking Propecia and wait for the side effects to disappear as promised.

*And that's when then the nightmare really begins.....*

Initially, after you quit the drug, you feel great. Your libido and energy are back and the brain fog lifts...for about a month. Then everything collapses, and your world crashes down. You can't remember names, how to do your job, or even when to pay your bills. Organizing your thoughts, let alone your daily schedule, becomes a Herculean task. Sleep is now completely elusive and your boss suggests a leave of absence that sounds more permanent than temporary. But you take him up on the suggestion and take off the time because you can't possibly do your job now.

*What the hell is happening?*

The doctors you initially see tell you it's all in your head and prescribe antidepressants and sleeping pills as solutions. You're told by other medical professionals that it's stress, burnout- you need to take more time off. The depression is related to the burnout, to your hair loss, to the very act of modern living. No matter what, it can't be the drug. They insist, quite adamantly, that because finasteride has a very short lifespan in the body, there's no way you can still be experiencing side effects. Some even suggest it is simply age that's impacting your libido.

But, down deep, a niggling worm of doubt gnaws at you. Something is severely wrong and every cell in your body is screaming that the small, seemingly innocuous, pink pill

that's been a part of your daily routine for the last few years is the cause. You Google your symptoms in a desperate attempt to understand what is happening to your body. Digestive issues take hold. Along with the insomnia, you now have raging gastroesophageal reflux disease, commonly known as GERD.

Some of your symptoms-- the lack of focus, brain fog, memory issues and inability to plan or sleep-- fit the characteristics of ADD. Could you have somehow always had ADD and not known it?

Then you see it. Someone posting on an ADD forum about the same sort of symptoms as yours. But this guy has been diagnosed with post-finasteride syndrome or PFS. Finasteride, the drug that you've been taking under the name, Propecia, is apparently *not* harmless- contrary to what you'd been told before going on it.

Nausea hits you like a tsunami. That little pink pill you've been taking to save your hair...could it really be behind all your health issues? That pill you were guaranteed came with no permanent side effects? According to what you're now reading, finasteride may cause *permanent* sexual, neurological and physical side effects, including: breast cancer due to gynecomastia and increased incidents of an aggressive, deadly form of prostate cancer. Last but not least, reports of clinical depression and dozens of suicides have been linked to the use of finasteride.

Why weren't you aware of this earlier? Upon further research, you find out that Merck changed their warning labels on Propecia to reflect the possibility of permanent, untreatable side effects in some European countries in 2008. However, Propecia's product inserts in the United States and Canada would not be updated to reflect those same warnings until 2011.

That means millions of men in North America were prescribed the drug between 2008 and 2011 without the knowledge of the potentially devastating, permanent impact it might have on their lives.<sup>[1]</sup>

After doing even more research, there's one thing you know for certain: You are not alone. There are thousands of men around the world reaching out on social media, joining class action suits, desperately trying to find a way to restore their health and minds.

German journalist, Anne Kunze, in her expose on the local impact of the hair loss drug, referred to these previously healthy, vital men as an "army of the listless," now mostly unemployed and unemployable, living the lives of hermits. All are under age 35. Unable or undesiring of intimate relationships, many of them are just waiting to "expire."<sup>[2]</sup> All because of a drug taken to combat a cosmetic condition.

In 1992, the FDA approved Proscar, Merck's 5mg finasteride drug for enlarged prostates in older men. A mere five years later, in 1997, the hair loss treatment, Propecia, was approved for AGA. And, in the two decades since Propecia hit the global market, the lives of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of men have been changed irrevocably by the drug, but not in the way Merck and the prescribing doctors promised.

The question is, how was a drug with such a devastating profile of side effects ever allowed to reach the market in the first place?

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[1] In 2016, more than 10 000 000 prescriptions for Propecia were filled in the USA alone. If one takes Merck's assertion that approximately 2% of men who take the drug will develop side effects, it stands to reason that well over a million men globally (and this does not take into account women taking finasteride and dutasteride off-label nor the millions of scripts written for Proscar every year) are likely battling PFS. In fact, in 2016 in the US, 10 300 055 prescriptions for finasteride were filled and another 1 617 765 for dutasteride (another 5-alpha reductase inhibiting drug).

<https://clincalc.com/DrugStats/Drugs/Finasteride>

[2] Kunze, Anne, "I Did Not Want to go Bald. The Pill the Doctor Gave Me Destroyed My Life," Die Zeit, Feb. 23, 2018.