

## It's in the genes

IT'S bad enough if you suddenly find that you're suffering from hair loss due to an accident or medical side effect. But it's an even more emotional experience if you know that it's in your genes to begin with and you can't avoid what's coming.

"I was 16 years old when I first showed scalp skin," shares Dr Ruban Nathan. "Of course, I knew of my genetic inheritance beforehand, so it was like waiting for an unwelcome guest to arrive for dinner. I didn't date until I was 21, so make your own conclusions ...," says the 49-year-old consultant dermatologist and hair transplant surgeon.

"I was overly sensitive about any remarks made about my style of grooming and I would only get my hair cut by this one guy who was a friend of mine. He helped relieve my anxiety by saying that I was lucky because the shape of my head was great! That actually took the edge off those harrowing visits to the hair salon!"

He tried out all the usual recommended remedies such as shampoos and tonics, none of which worked.

"This was prior to the now proven Minoxidil and propecia. It's a pity because if these were available to me then, propecia may have helped me retain most of my follicles – as it has done since I started on



**Hurrah!** Manchester United striker Wayne Rooney underwent a successful hair transplant.

it in the late 90s."

Dr Ruban is probably the best candidate to talk about hair transplant since he has had four surgeries himself in the last two decades or so.

"I was 21 when my father convinced me that it was the only solution to combat future alopecia.

"I underwent hair transplant twice in the 80s, once in the early 90s and the last time

was in 2012. Repeat treatments were necessary as the number of grafts transplanted then were in the order of 200 to 400 grafts only," he explains.

Dr Ruban's first surgery was in 1984, performed by a British plastic surgeon using the now obsolete punch grafting method. Most people do not realise it, but dermatologists were the pioneers in the field of restoration. It made sense to Dr Ruban, already a qualified dermatologist then, to venture one step further into an area of expertise in which he had vested personal interest.

In 1994, he went on to train under Dr Dow Stough, the founder of the International Society of Hair Restoration Surgeons. As someone who has experienced the evolution of hair transplant first-hand, he says the key difference lies in the use of single graft transplants now versus punch grafting.

"The old method resulted in the unfortunate 'doll's hair' appearance whereas nowadays, you get a natural-looking hairline. There's also a distinct difference in the refinements such as the local anaesthetic cocktail used, and the drugs to minimise post-operation swelling and reduce discomfort."

Dr Ruban advises those who are considering hair transplant to enquire about the surgeon's experience and photographs.

"It's also important to have some idea of the experience of the hair transplant team, including the number of nurses and technicians at hand," he says, adding

that a strong and large enough support team that is highly skilled is crucial in reducing the surgery time and ensuring the success rate of hair regrowth.

"Looking back, I just wished that the technology had arrived to the level that it is now, 20 years ago. I could have done a single procedure and not have had to worry over it ever again!" says Dr Ruban.

Another patient, Jack\* (a pseudonym), first noticed he was losing hair when he was 17. He tried various traditional oils and home-made remedies recommended by friends and family, but nothing seemed to work.

He then decided to seek help from a professional hair loss centre. For a year, the 20-year-old student was put through special oil treatments, scalp massages and electrical impulses were applied to his head. Instead of alleviating the problem, Jack's hair loss became even more severe.

Then, one day when he was at a hair salon, someone there recommended that he consult a doctor. When the hair transplant surgeon saw Jack, he immediately recognised the classic traits of genetic hair loss, especially since Jack was still in his teens when the first signs appeared.

"By the time I consulted the doctor, I had lost close to 60% of my hair," says Jack. "I had heard of hair transplants before – footballer Wayne Rooney did it with much success – but then, that seemed like a distant story and wasn't something I could relate to. But when the doctor suggested it, a hair transplant became a viable option."

Jack describes the procedure as relatively easy and painless. Initially, when the anaesthetic was being injected, he felt the needle pricks, but then, the numbness set in and it was pretty smooth sailing from there. It took four hours to transplant 2,000 hair grafts. This took place last July and Jack says the positive difference is clearly visible today.

"I was already on holiday from college anyway so I didn't have any problems taking time off for the surgery. I wore a cap for a year prior to the procedure so my friends hardly noticed anything," says Jack.

Jack needs to go back to see the doctor every three months for follow-ups, but he will not be needing any other hair treatment or transplant henceforth.

"Immediately after surgery, I was advised not to bend forward too much and avoid being hit on the head. The hardest part was sleeping at night as I had to try and avoid crushing the grafts (lest they were compromised). I also had to be very gentle when washing my hair for the first few months."

By the way, Jack doesn't wear a cap anymore ...

## LET'S HAIR IT FOR THE BOYS

Sure, some men still look hot when they're bald but it's not easy coming to terms with hair loss. Celebrities like footballer Wayne Rooney and Backstreet Boys singer A.J. McLean have openly admitted to taking the plunge and going for a hair transplant. Others who suddenly turn up with a fuller head of hair six months down the road after sporting very little hair, are strongly suspected of having gone through the procedure!



British thespian **Jude Law, 40**, was ranked in 2006 as one of the top 10 most bankable film stars in Hollywood. Then his career lost its lustre, along with his receding hairline and thinning patch on top. Recently however, he has been snapped on the red carpet sporting a much fuller head of curls in places we're pretty certain were bald just a while ago.



British celebrity chef **Gordon Ramsay, 46**, has a temper, but he is just as vain as any celebrity. He might have had a hair transplant in an attempt to look and feel younger. Ramsay apparently spent 12 hours at a clinic having follicles removed from lush patches of his scalp before they were reinserted where his hairline was thinning.



Canadian-American actor **Brendan Fraser, 44**, became a household name thanks to his starring role in *The Mummy* trilogy. But while he battled mythic Egyptian mummies on the big screen, in real life, he has been fighting a different kind of curse – male pattern baldness. It was clear in 2003 that his hair was thinning severely, but after wrapping up filming of the third *Mummy* flick, his long mane made a rather miraculous comeback.

It's refreshingly honest when a celebrity admits to plastic surgery or in this instance, a hair transplant. Backstreet Boys crooner **A.J. McLean, 35**, recently underwent hair transplant surgery to regrow his hair. In recent years, he has been suffering from premature balding, so he turned to medical experts to help get back his hair. McLean even shared before and after photos of his transformation on Instagram, writing, "This was the one thing I did and I couldn't be happier (about)."



TROUBLE is, because it's such a lucrative business, many centres offering hair transplant with questionable accreditation have sprouted. The fact is, the procedure cannot be performed by beauticians or untrained medical professionals. There have been alleged cases of "hair transplant courses" being offered and "hair transplant experts" created overnight.

Unfortunately, those who fall prey to these "experts" end up not only losing more hair, but draining their pockets as well.

According to consultant aesthetics doctor and hair transplant surgeon Dr Chiam Tee Kiang, there is no data on the number of registered hair transplant centres in Malaysia. Qualified doctors who are willing to invest in the technology and keen to take it up as a business can do so, he says, adding that "there has been a significant increase in the demand for this sort of procedures".

"I know of a patient who paid thousands for a hair transplant in India – yet didn't obtain the

## Take home message

desired results – before he came to see me. You have a right to ask about the doctor's training or whatever aspect that you may be unsure of," Dr Ruban Nathan qualifies.

Dr Steven K.W. Chow, president of the Malaysian Society for Hair Science (MSHS), says that duly qualified plastic surgeons have the training and skill to perform hair transplant surgery as part of their training, but they usually don't provide this on a full-time basis as they also provide the full range of other services.

(The objective of MSHS is to promote, develop, increase knowledge and awareness on the science of hair in health and disease.)

"A centre providing this on a full-time basis (should be registered with the relevant authorities) and have a team of trained technicians whose job it is to prepare

and extract hair follicles from the harvested donor scalp tissue for reimplantation. This is very labour-intensive," explains Dr Chow. "We have come across some centres advertising on the Internet, but their status should be verified with the Health Ministry."

The success rate depends on various factors.

"Proper planning is crucial, especially if it's a young patient. You need to monitor him for the next five to 10 years, and not just the next few weeks," says Dr Ruban, adding that 70% of his patients are men.

"A lifestyle change is important, like quitting or reducing smoking or drinking, and improved sleep quality, for better results. Once hair is transplanted, patients need to wait a minimum of six months before any clear results are apparent, hence they need to be patient.

Also, they need to have enough donor hair at the back of the head before hair transplantation can be considered," Dr Chiam explains.

In very rare occasions when it's not viable to take hair follicles from the back of the head, hair can also be taken from the chest, chin (beard) or even the leg.

"Cost can be a hindering factor. But there has been an increase in the number of patients in the last few years. Men make up a high percentage due to hereditary conditions as they are more prone to hair loss," he elaborates.

In Australia, it costs approximately A\$9 (RM30) per graft; in the United States, US\$1 to US\$3 (RM3 to RM10); and in Malaysia, it's about RM10 to RM25 per graft, shares Dr Ruban. As such, a transplant of 2,000 grafts may cost RM20,000 or more.

"We are talking about tens of thousands of ringgit for the surgery. It involves scalp surgery and there is also downtime involved," Dr Chow opines.

"Patients suitable for this treat-

ment have to be assessed by a doctor familiar with the problem of hair loss. All potential medically treatable causes of hair loss will have to be excluded.

There are also situations where surgery is not a viable option like hair loss due to underlying diseases such as auto-immune hair loss, infections, psychogenic hair loss (trichotillomania – psychogenic hair pulling and dysmorphophobia-pathological perception of body image) and poor nutrition."

In Dr Chow's experience, most patients are too embarrassed to complain if anything should go wrong. Any formal complaints can be forwarded to the Health Ministry which then refers it for investigation by the Malaysian Medical Council.

The bottomline is, a hair transplant isn't something to be rushed into.

"You should always talk to a qualified specialist, and if in doubt, seek a second opinion, be it a dermatologist or plastic surgeon," he concludes.



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