Hair pulling:

a mysterious, complex disorder

By LIZ DOUP
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The eyelashes went first. The mother, peering into her 9-year-old daughter's face, noticed some missing.

Then the child's eyebrows grew thin. And bald spots appeared by one ear.

The mother was baffled, then alarmed. Her daughter was literally tearing her hair out.

Trichotillomania, came the diagnosis. Compulsive hair pulling.

"It's been so frustrating, so depressing," says the Hollywood mother, who asked not to be identified, concerned for her daughter's privacy. "It's difficult for her — kids teasing and making fun of her, calling her 'baldy.' It's difficult for us, watching our child take all the hair out of her head."

Though trichotillomania appears to be as common as other psychiatric disorders such as panic disorder, it's still a whispered little secret for many of the 5 million to 10 million people — mainly females — who struggle with it daily.

Its legacy is shame and embarrassment. Its cause, a mystery. Its cure, illusive.

Though new research will be presented at a conference on trichotillomania in Atlanta next month, even experts behind the studies don't offer definitive answers.

"It's a complicated disorder," says Rich-

PLEASE SEE DISORDER, 5F
Therapies can ease urge to pull hair

HAIR LOSS: The results of trichotillomania.

The American Journal of Psychiatry

BEHAVIOR THERAPY: Husband and wife psychologists Nathan Azrin and Victoria Basalid work with chronic hair pullers in Davie.

 party and co-director of the Massachusetts General Hospital Trichotillomania Clinic, "Although people have many of the same similarities, treatment that one person doesn't help another."

First named by a French dermatologist about 100 years ago, trichotillomania (from Greek and pronounced trichotillojania) causes people to feel a tension before they pull their hair, and little pain.

It often begins in childhood or adolescence, perhaps triggered by a stressful situation or trauma, though children often can't articulate the catalyst and their parents can't pinpoint any incident.

"People are highly shamed by it," says Bruce Hyman, a Hollywood psychologist who works with trichotillomania cases. They're ashamed to talk about it. They're afraid to acknowledge it. They do it privately and hide it from everyone, with false eyelashes and wigs.

Desperate for help, those who pull their hair often bounce from psychologists to psychiatrists, trying everything from behavior modification therapies to an array of pharmaceuticals. Sometimes one helps. Sometimes another. Sometimes treatments help for a little while, then they don't.

"It's hit or miss as far as help goes," says the Hollywood mother, whose daughter has tried multiple medications and therapies but is now nearly bald again. "Some people think that this drug or that therapy will work. It's like rolling the dice.

Behavior therapy - using relaxation, imagery and rewards - require time and effort. But they can provide relief without medication's side effects. Still, they're generally not as effective in reducing the depression and anxiety that may accompany trichotillomania.

Some behavior therapies used today hinge on work done by Nathan Azrin, among the first psychologists in the country to address trichotillomania when he co-wrote Habit Control in a Day in 1965. Today, 25 years ago. Now a professor of psychology at Nova Southeastern, he and his wife, psychologist Victoria Basalid, work with chronic hair pullers in their private practice in Davie.

"Changing your thoughts [in order to change your behavior] is more easily said than done," Azrin says.

That's why many people also take medication, which can help reduce the urge to pull, in addition to seeing a therapist. Antidepressants, which enhance serotonin, a chemical neurotransmitter in the brain, show some promise. They include Anafranil, Prozac, Paxil and Zoloft.

But when they're stopped, hair pulling often recurs. They also can lose their effectiveness over time. And there are side effects, ranging from headaches and nausea to weight gain and sexual dysfunction. As a result, long-term use also isn't known.

In their hunt for a cause and better treatments, some researchers, including O'Sullivan, focus on brain metabolism. In their research, they've found differences in brain scans between those who pull and don't pull their hair. Some researchers also point to a genetic predisposition. Relatives of people with trichotillomania have different patterns of abnormal brain metabolism and generally don't have obsessive thoughts.

While researchers continue to look for answers, those with trichotillomania and their parents must deal with the psychological fallout.

Just recently, the Hollywood girl, now 10, told her mother she was worried about going to a new school after the family moves. "I don't have hair," she told her mother. "Nobody will like me."

Another parent, a Miami mother whose 16-year-old daughter has pulled her hair since age 8, says her daughter will scarcely touch the subject.

"She usually won't even talk to me about it," the mother says. "Only when she gets desperate, when she's really scared about the lack of control, will she talk a little. It's a very guarded, very closed thing for her."

For parents watching their children pluck themselves bald, it's a painful duty.

"There were times when I felt like she was pulling my hair out," says the Miami mother. "It was that personal. But I'm still her mother. I'd rather it be me who goes through the pain."

Some parents and people with trichotillomania find support through the Trichotillomania Learning Center in Santa Cruz, Calif., a nonprofit educational organization started in 1991.

Its founder, Christina Pearson, 41, suffered from trichotillomania for two decades before she learned eight years ago that she wasn't unique.

"I thought I was the only one who did this," says Pearson, who sold her communications business to start the center. "I thought it was weak and must be a defect in human being. My hair pulling ruffled me."

For years, Pearson feared people would think her weird. She told them that since the age of 13, she had an uncontrollable urge to pull her hair out. Through the center, she hopes to increase awareness of trichotillomania and stop feeling alone.

For those dealing with the disorder, that can mean a lot.

"Our daughter had to grow fast," says the Miami mother. "The stares she's had to endure. She looks now she's more accepted of people with problems. She understands what it's like."