

# YOUR GOOD HEALTH

## Cold-cap therapy

Treatment may help chemotherapy patients keep hair

By JoAnne Viviano

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Jen Tassi felt like a bobblehead as her oncologist explained her breast cancer diagnosis, the various drugs that would make up her chemotherapy treatments and how and when they'd be delivered.

The barrage of information overwhelmed her, so she just nodded and kept saying "OK."

She felt like she had no control.

So when the Ohio woman discovered something that she just might be able to control, she went for it.

That something was her hair.

And so Tassi ventured into the world of cold capping, a technology that cools the head during chemotherapy treatments, allowing some patients to retain at least a portion of their hair.

"It was a huge thing to look at yourself in the mirror every day and not look like I was sick," she said. "You looked like a healthy person, so you kind of felt like a healthy person, or you didn't look like a cancer patient when you were out."

The therapy limits both the amount and strength of the drugs that reach hair follicles by constricting blood vessels and slowing metabolic activity. Patients either wear gel-containing caps, often rented from manufacturers, that are frozen before use or caps that are attached to cooling devices.

Tassi, a 38-year-old survivor, has become an advocate for the therapy and for the Susan G. Komen organization.

Julie McMahon, who directs mission and strategy for Komen in Columbus, Ohio, said retaining hair can help motivate people

to maintain healthy habits during treatment.

"It's kind of hard for them to feel healthy in other ways, to eat healthy and exercise when they feel like they look ill," she said.

Tassi and some other local patients who have used the cap want providers to make patients more aware. OhioHealth responded to a suggestion from one of the cap users by forming a committee that is working with providers to get information to patients.

"You want to be able to compartmentalize what is happening to you. So the cancer and the treatment of it is one part of your life, but you don't want it to become your identity," said Pauline Russ, a breast cancer survivor. "You want to blend in as much as possible."

At Ohio State University's Stefanie Spielman Comprehensive Breast Center, patients can use a machine that circulates coolant through a cap. Since it arrived at the beginning of May, seven or eight patients have used it, said Dr. Maryam Lustberg, an associate professor of medicine and medical director of survivorship. Previously, patients had been bringing in frozen caps.

"It's about privacy and going to the grocery store and not having to explain to everyone what's going on with you," Lustberg said. "We see such an incredible impact on the quality of life experience of these patients."

Insurance usually does not cover the cost of cold capping — around \$500 a month — though it will credit the cost of a wig. The effectiveness of the capping treatment can depend on what chemotherapy drug is being used.

Tassi borrowed the caps she used, four of them, from

other survivors and took them to her treatment sessions at the Bing in a cooler of dry ice. Her husband, Pete, rotated them out every 20 minutes or so to ensure that her scalp stayed cold.

Because the caps need to go on an hour before therapy and stay on for



Jen Tassi, a breast cancer survivor, used cold-cap therapy to keep her hair during chemo. [Jen Tassi courtesy]

### What's the difference between cold caps and scalp cooling systems?

Cold caps are similar to ice packs in that they are kept in a special freezer before they're worn. They also thaw out during an infusion session and need to be replaced every 30 minutes. The caps and the special freezer are usually rented by the patient.

With scalp cooling systems, the cap is attached to a small refrigeration machine that circulates coolant, so it doesn't need to be changed during the chemo treatment. The refrigeration machines are owned by the chemotherapy treatment center and patients pay a fee to use them.

### Reducing the cost of treatment

The Rapunzel Project is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping people undergoing chemotherapy access and use scalp-cooling technology. More information about the organization can be found at <http://www.rapunzelproject.org/Default.aspx>.

The Hair to Stay Foundation offers not only information and support but also grants to help pay for scalp cooling costs.

Visit <http://www.hairtostay.org>.

Source: [Breastcancer.org](http://Breastcancer.org)

three hours after, Tassi wore them for six to seven hours during each of her 16 chemo treatments from November 2016 until April 2017.

She could only wash her hair once a week, in cold water in the bathtub.

And even with the cold-cap therapy, she didn't keep all her hair.

It thinned out quite a bit.

But, she said, "I still looked like me."

"I wanted to keep my life as normal as possible," she said. "And I didn't want cancer to take things away from me."

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