

There's a Price on Your Head



No hair
apparent.

HIS WOMAN HAS ME BY THE SHORT HAIRS.

The short, fine, about-to-fall-out-and-never-grow-back hairs. "Are you thinning, balding, or both?" the telemarketer, a young woman evidently, asks pertly.

"Um, thinning," I say.

"Have you heard of DHT?" she asks.

"I think so," I reply. "What is it again?"

"DHT is dihydrotestosterone," she says, sounding a lot like she's reading from a script, "a bad body chemical that is the reason you are thinning and balding."

Luckily, she has the answer. "Avacor," she informs me, "has a clinically proven 90 percent success rate." *Ninety percent?* The two FDA-approved hair-loss treatments—Rogaine (a.k.a. minoxidil) and Propecia—claim only 33 and 67 percent regrowth rates, respectively. All I have to do is buy the three-part "hair-care system"—an all-natural "DHT blocker," a "physician's topical solution," and a "scalp detoxifying shampoo."

The cost: \$220 for a 3-month supply.

I hesitate at the price. "Can I see the study?"

"You'll get it with your order," she says.

I hem some more. "Well, then can you tell me what's actually in Avacor?"

"We don't just give out our formula over the phone," she says. She can tell me, however, that it is "all natural" and has no side effects.

"It's definitely worth a try if you want to keep your hair," she adds, beginning to sound notice-

ably impatient. "We have a money-back guarantee, so there's nothing to lose."

I'D HEARD THE ADS, OF course. If you're a guy and you own an AM radio, there's almost no escaping the Avacor spots and their ubiquitous narrator, a man who identifies himself only as "Dr. Gordon." From morning drive time to the wee hours of the night, sports talk to contemporary Christian, Dr. Gordon rules the airwaves, the balding man's medical savior.

One typical radio ad goes, "I'm Dr. Gordon of the Hair and Skin Treatment Center in New York. Here's what my patients have to say about the revolutionary new hair-care system Avacor." There follows a stream of testimonials from formerly shedding guys—age 39, or 26, or 42—who've miraculously sprouted full crops of hair. "Avacor is all natural," Dr. Gordon says in some of the ads, "and completely safe and effective. Stop your hair loss and start regrowing a full, healthy head of hair today."

In the TV ads, Dr. Gordon recounts his own miraculous results: Well into his 50s, he sports a healthy shock of white hair, which he says he's regrown thanks to 6 years on Avacor. (According to the telemarketer I talked to, Dr. Gordon invented Avacor, but he doesn't mention this in the ads.) His voice is kind of high-pitched, almost geeky—how could this guy lie to you?

Apparently, the ad barrage is working: according to *Response*, the magazine of the direct-marketing industry, Avacor was the third-best-selling product on the Internet in April, beating out such as-seen-on-TV giants as the Turbo Cooker and the Juiceman II. "I get asked about Avacor more than anything else," says Spencer Kobren, a consumer advocate, author of *The Bald Truth*, and host of a nationally syndicated radio talk show of the same name. And almost every man with a molting mane asks Kobren the same \$220

question: Does Avacor live up to its claims?

Wilma Bergfeld, M.D., doubts it. As director of dermatology at the Cleveland Clinic and one of the country's leading baldness experts, she knows hair-loss treatments, and when I told her about Avacor's supposed success rate, she scoffed, "Oh, pooh! Nothing's 90 percent."



Okay, but what about the too-funny-to-be-fake testimonials posted on Avacor's Web site by its manufacturer, Global Vision Products? (After experiencing a quarter inch of hair growth, Jim writes, "Thinking I could accelerate the growth, I had my wife shave off all the new hair.")

"Much of healing is in the mind of the healed, and a patient using magic foo-foo lotion on his hair may actually feel it is helping," notes Douglas Altchek, M.D., a clinical professor of dermatology at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City. "Very often, particularly in something like hair growth, state of mind is quite important." (Case in point: In the clinical trials of Rogaine, 16 percent of the placebo group had measurable new hair growth.)

Which is why, if you're using Avacor and still want to believe, you should stop reading now.

A FEW DAYS AFTER MY chat with the phone rep, my shipment arrives. And what's this? As promised, it contains a glossy medical study,

FOLLIGUARD EXTRA BY JUNGLE M.D. (\$200 for a 3-month supply)

▷ **What it is:** A 2 percent minoxidil solution; a saw-palmetto-based supplement; and a shampoo containing capsi-cum—the hot stuff in peppers—and peppermint, among other ingredients.

▷ **What they claim:** "Helps reactivate hair growth."

▷ **What you should know:** It's basically marked-up minoxidil and an unproven "DHT blocker" containing saw palmetto and *Pygeum africanum*, two herbs used to treat enlarged prostates. As for the "Scalp Volumizing Shampoo," the capsi-cum and peppermint will make your scalp feel tingly; but according to Ken Washenik, M.D., Ph.D., former director of dermatopharmacology at New York University, "Tingling does not equal hair growth."

HAIR ADVANTAGE BY DANIEL ROGERS LABORATORIES (\$180 for a 3-month supply)

▷ **What it is:** Shampoo; a "nutrient serum" containing something called Loniten, as well as tarakaci, notoptcryll, and other herbs; and a supplement spiked with saw palmetto, maidenhair tree, *Vaccinium myrtillus*, and equisetum.

▷ **What they claim:** "You'll begin to see new growth after about 3 months."

▷ **What you should know:** It's nearly identical to Avacor—Loniten is another name for minoxidil (the original version, once taken orally to control high blood pressure). Also, Daniel Rogers Laboratories has an "unsatisfactory" rating from the Better Business Bureau, and has received a warning from the FDA for claiming that one of its earlier products, Natural Hairs, could promote hair growth.

NU HAIR BY BIOTECH CORP. (\$60 for a 1-month supply)

▷ **What it is:** A supplement containing the Chinese herb *he shou wou*, saw palmetto, and other ingredients. Also, a "Thinning Hair Serum" that contains horsetail, henna, rosemary, saw palmetto, progesterone, *he shou wou*, and nettle.

▷ **What they claim:** "Thickens hair naturally; 'energizes' follicular growth."

▷ **What you should know:** Biotech received an FDA warning letter in 1999 for claims related to the now discontinued Shen Min with Minoxidil. Marketing for Nu Hair has been toned down, but not all the way: The supplement is labeled "Hair Regrowth Tablets," but the ingredients are still unproven.

THYMUSKIN BY BIOTECHNE COMPLEX, INC. (\$70 for a 1-month supply)

▷ **What it is:** A shampoo containing, among other things, extract of calf thymus glands.

▷ **What they claim:** Thymus extract supposedly boosts immune function, the decline of which is (the company says) a cause of hair loss. "Clinically proven" in Germany.

▷ **What you should know:** While the German studies seem to show some effectiveness with hair loss caused by autoimmune problems and also with male pattern baldness, the product needs more rigorous testing, say Jerry Shapiro, M.D., and Marty Sawaya, M.D., coauthors of a University of Miami study on hair-loss treatments,

The study looks impressive. Grandly titled "The Biological Effects of Combined Herbal Oral and Topical Formulations on Androgenetic Alopecia," it lists as authors R. Ortiz, M.D.; D.J. Carlisi, M.D.; and one A. Imbriolo, Global Vision's president, identified here as an "Herbal Medicine Consultant." Although the study is formatted like a reprint from some august medical

journal, it appears on closer inspection to be unpublished.

It's also a bit short on specifics: It doesn't list any ingredients of the "Herbal Based Topical Formulation" or the "Herbal Oral Medication" used in the study. Normally, scientists tell you what it is they're testing. And while the heading describes this as a "controlled study," there is no mention of any control group. At

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the end, the authors sum up their results: "The overall outcome of this therapeutic modality has proved to be an extremely beneficial treatment approach in the management of androgenetic [sic] alopecia (hair loss)."

Accompanying the study is a small graph that at first glance appears to chart the number of patients reporting hair growth over time. But a closer look by Ken Washenik, M.D., Ph.D., former director of dermatopharmacology at New York University, reveals that this isn't the case: "You can't conclude this from the graph. It lacks hair-growth measurements. What it seems to show is that, over time, more people bought Avacor."

Dr. Altchek's assessment of the Avacor study and its methodology isn't any more favorable: "yet another non-peer-reviewed, non-double-blind, seemingly scientific study subsidized by the makers of the product."

I turn to the bottles. The "All

Natural Herbal DHT Blocker" contains, among other things, "Maidenhair Tree, Vaccinium Murtillus, Equisetum, Sabal Serulate." As it turns out, these are ancient or obscure (and in a couple of instances, misspelled) names for common herbs like *Ginkgo biloba*, horsetail, and bilberry. But, according to the *German Commission E Monographs*—the bible of herbal medicine—none are known for their hair-growing properties.

The last ingredient on the list stumps me for a while, until I figure out that "Sabal Serulate" is actually *Sabal serrulata*, or saw palmetto. Bingo: Saw-palmetto-berry extract has been used for years to treat prostate enlargement, which like baldness is linked to overproduction of DHT. A number of studies have suggested that saw palmetto somehow inhibits the production of DHT—which is how Propecia works—but it's never been proved to halt or reverse hair loss.

Homegrown Hair

Skip the snake oil and save your failing follicles with this three-step plan

► **Step 1. BUY CHEAP MINOXIDIL.** It doesn't matter if it's CVS brand or Walgreens, generic minoxidil is FDA approved to help grow hair. Pick up the 5 percent Extra-Strength variety, but trash the enclosed spray applicator. "You'll end up spraying most of your dosage on your hair instead of your scalp, and it won't have its full effect," says Ivan Cohen, M.D., a professor of dermatology at Yale University. "The medicine dropper allows you to get the product directly onto your scalp." And if you fertilize post-shower, towel your head off first. "If there's too much water, the solution will be diluted, and it won't work as well," says Dr. Cohen.

► **Step 2. PRETEND YOU HAVE DANDRUFF.** We know, you need hair to have dandruff. But a recent study cited in *Dermatology Times* showed that balding men who lathered daily with 1 percent zinc pyrithione dandruff shampoo for 26 weeks grew about six times more hair than men using regular shampoo. The theory? A significant number of balding men have inflamed scalps. "Low-grade inflammation can speed up the rate at which you lose your hair," says Dr. Cohen. "Using a zinc pyrithione shampoo could help reduce the inflammation." Generic dandruff shampoo with zinc pyrithione will run you \$3.

► **Step 3. ASK YOUR DOCTOR ABOUT PROPECIA.** Also known as finasteride, this prescription pill blocks testosterone from being turned into dihydrotestosterone (DHT), a hormone that causes hair follicles to become dormant. And, unlike minoxidil, which grows hair only on the top of the head, popping a daily dose of Propecia can also put the brakes on a receding hairline—if you start taking it now. "The most important thing with Propecia is that the earlier you start taking it, the better it will work," says Dr. Cohen. "If you wait, you'll never get back to where you could have been."

—LAURA ONGARO



AVACOR

ACTUAL USER PHOTOS

You buying any of this?

"After Propecia came out, companies selling dubious hair-loss remedies latched on to the science behind it," says Spencer Kobren, who has also been investigating Avacor and its claims. "The fact that we understand what causes baldness gives these guys a lot of ammunition."

"Do I have patients who are on saw palmetto? Yes," says Dr. Bergfeld. "Have I seen changes in some of them? Yes. But it's been one patient, two patients. It's not 90 percent."

Then there's the topical formula. The label lists "adenophorae, chanomelis, lobellae, notopteryll, tarakaci," and a few chemicals with long, complicated names. I draw a near total blank on the herbs, although "lobellae" seems to be a variant spelling of lobelia, commonly known as "puke weed" or "gag root."

Hmmm.

And what's this? While the telemarketer had assured me that Avacor does not contain minoxidil—"There are no chemicals or drugs in Avacor; this is all natural," she'd said—there it is: 2,4-Diamino-6 piperidinopyrimidine 3 oxide.

When I call up the Global Vision offices in Manhattan, I'm transferred to Henry Edelson, M.D., who identifies himself as "director of research."

"It is minoxidil," confirms Dr. Edelson. (He adds that the sales rep "was giving out inappropriate information. Thanks for calling that to our attention.") During our conversation, I press Dr. Edelson for the exact biological mecha-

nism behind Avacor, but he simply says, "When it all works together, it works."

No surprise there: Minoxidil has been shown—"clinically proven," in fact—to help grow hair. So it stands to reason that a product containing minoxidil would regrow hair in some users.

On the other hand, drugstore minoxidil costs about 10 bucks a month, and saw-palmetto gel caps are another \$10 to \$15 from CVS. Subtract that from the \$220 I'd spent on Avacor, and I've just paid Global Vision about \$150 for three 6-ounce bottles of almond-scented shampoo. Dr. Gordon played me for a sucker.

WHO IS DR. GORDON? New York City dermatologists who specialize in hair loss don't know. "Neither my colleagues nor I know him professionally," says Dr. Washenik. "And the dermatologic community here is kind of small."

The good news: Dr. David L. Gordon did go to medical school. He is a doctor (a radiologist). State records show that he graduated in 1975 from the Autonomous University of Guadalajara, Mexico (also the alma mater of study author Dr. Ortiz).

Now the bad news: Dr. David L. Gordon is also a graduate of the Queensboro Correctional Facility in New York, where, according to the New York State Department of Health, he did time for Medicaid fraud in the mid-1990s. As a result, the medical board stripped him of his license in 1995.

This raises all sorts of ques-

tions, but my calls to Global Vision are now going unreturned. So I decide to pay the company an unscheduled visit. My first stop is the office of the New York Hair and Skin Treatment Center, located on the second floor of the same building in Manhattan where Global Vision is housed.

The Center appears to consist of two rooms: An outer waiting area with a few chairs (but no receptionist) and an inner office, where I find Dr. Gordon sitting behind a desk. One wall is covered in framed diplomas, for him as well as for Dr. Robert Ortiz and Dr. Henry Edelson, whose names are on the plaque outside the office door.

He's the same man in the ads, 50-ish, with white hair, only without the white lab coat. His hair clings to his head in a disheveled mop-cut (perhaps he

would have looked better bald). When Dr. Gordon stands up, I see that he has a hunchback. I introduce myself, and his face falls. "Go," he says, shutting the door. "I'm not talking to you."

Moments later he comes back out and waves me inside.

"The reason I lost my license was because I was entrapped by my scumbag brother into a Medicaid treatment scam!" he shouts. "I had no idea what was going on!"

Dr. Gordon admits that he had agreed to review and sign off on bogus sonograms taken by his brother and his cronies at sonogram centers on Long Island. "I was having trouble keeping my practice open," he says. He helped his brother find other doctors to sign off on the sonograms as well—and only later did he learn that the sonograms were fake, he says.

The claims were submitted to Medicaid, and the doctors and the sonogram centers would split the payment. According to the New York Medicaid-fraud-

"Tony is my friend," referring to Anthony Imbriolo, president of Global Vision. "He knew I was having problems, and he tried to help me. That's as far as it goes."

In 1987 Anthony Imbriolo was sued by Upjohn, the maker of Rogaine, for patent infringement.

control unit, the ring scammed more than \$1 million. Dr. Gordon blamed his brother for the scheme, but the state medical board didn't buy it and permanently revoked his right to practice medicine.

Oddest of all, he vehemently denies any link to Avacor or Global Vision. He claims he has had no role in developing the product, and no financial interest in the company. "I'm just like Mr. Whipple, who did the toilet-paper commercials," he says.

I WOULD LIKE TO STAY and talk with Anthony Imbriolo, but a man who introduces himself as Dr. Edelson enters the room and urges me in quiet but serious tones to leave.

Turns out in 1987 Imbriolo was sued by Upjohn, the maker of Rogaine, for patent infringement. He was accused of creating his own version of minoxidil, the active ingredient in Rogaine, and selling it under another product

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name. In his defense, Imbriolo claimed that he wasn't making minoxidil, but simply buying Rogaine, mixing it with other ingredients, and reselling the result as "Minoxidil Plus." That would have been perfectly legal—at least as far as patent law goes—because Upjohn would still have been paid for its product. But Imbriolo couldn't produce invoices for his Rogaine purchases, and when a federal judge ordered him to take a bottle of Rogaine and whip up some "Minoxidil Plus" in the courtroom, he couldn't do it. In a letter to the judge, his own lawyer described him as a "bucket chemist."

Finally, in 1995, he was found in contempt of court.



In her opinion, the judge wrote that Imbriolo "willfully has sought to evade the Court's authority through an illusive trail of feigned ignorance, faulty recordkeeping, questionable documentation, and hidden overseas purchases." Imbriolo was fined and ordered to pay attorneys' fees to Upjohn.

By that point, it didn't matter much: Upjohn's patent expired the following year, which meant that Imbriolo could now make his own minoxidil without fear of being sued. Global Vision was incorporated, and Avacor went on the market in 1990.

IN 1989, THE FDA banned the marketing of all over-the-counter hair-growth products, except

those approved under the agency's New Drug Application process. Rogaine went through the process and was approved, as were the generic versions you see on pharmacy and supermarket shelves. Avacor? It hasn't passed the scrutiny of the New Drug Application process, let alone been approved. Bottom line: Global Vision is in violation of FDA regulations.

"We are aware of this product," one FDA official told me. "We do follow up on products that are in violation of the law." Well, eventually they do. The official added that unapproved products are the agency's second priority, after risks to public health.

The FDA might also want to look into the discrepancy between Avacor's advertising, which claims that it is completely safe, and the fine print

day in major markets such as New York, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles.

All this was terribly discouraging; so much for the placebo effect. I called, and after a little guff from customer service, I got a return authorization. (A month or so later, I received a check.)

And yet some users of Avacor—and umpteen other unproved baldness cures—continue to hope. These are the men who count the hairs in their combs or shower drains, the guys who exercise upside down to stimulate bloodflow to their scalps, the men who can't walk past a mirror without rating themselves on the Norwood Scale for male pattern baldness. For them, every disappointed-looking blind date is a potential Avacor saleswoman.

I'm talking about guys like

"We are aware of this product," says one FDA official. "We do follow up on products that are in violation of the law."

on the bottles. It warns that users should discontinue using the product if they experience symptoms such as "chest pain, rapid heartbeat, faintness, dizziness, suddenly unexplained weight gain." (Not coincidentally, these are the same warnings that appear on all bottles of minoxidil.)

It seems the Federal Trade Commission may join the fray, too. Last November, the National Advertising Division of the Better Business Bureau sent a letter to Global Vision, asking it to substantiate its advertising claims. When the NAD didn't get a satisfactory answer, it referred Global Vision to the FTC. (The agency doesn't comment on its investigations.)

Meanwhile, Avacor is still on the radio several times a

Darin Schneider, a 30-year-old software engineer from Denver. He ordered Avacor about 5 months ago, even though he had his doubts. "I almost sent the stuff back because I was so disappointed with the 'statistical' analysis."

But he tried it anyway. At first, his hair loss accelerated. But after 2 months, it slowed and stopped. "I don't really expect to grow new hair, although that would certainly be nice," he says. If some product out there could regrow his hair, or allow him to keep it, with a 90 percent chance of success, he says, he'd be more than happy to pay \$70 a month for it. "I spend that much on stupid stuff each month anyway."

That should be music to Dr. Gordon's ears. **MCH**