

I COULDN'T STOP PULLING OUT MY EYELASHES

For years, Amy Toms thought she was going mad. Unable to stop herself pulling out her own eyelashes, the 23-year-old from Hampshire eventually discovered a website that has turned her life around. She tells **SARAH JONES** about her experience.

WHEN I was a little girl my mum used to let me wear a little bit of mascara on special occasions. I think that's where my fascination with eyelashes started.

I remember picking off the dry, clumpy bits and a few came out that way.

One day, when I was nine-years-old, I was watching TV and thought, I wonder what happens if all your eyelashes disappear – would they grow back?

I started picking at them and pulled several out over the next few days. It happened more and more, and then one night after school I pulled them all out.

Looking in the mirror afterwards I thought, what have you done? I felt strange: really guilty and upset, but I also had this weird sense of relief.

Suddenly I had these bald eyes. Everyone at school kept asking if I was all right, I looked really tired and ill.

When my mum noticed she couldn't understand why I had done it, and I didn't have an answer for her.

Soon I started pulling out my eyebrows. I didn't have any eyelashes left so they became the next target. Every time my eyelashes started appearing, I would pull them out. I couldn't control it and didn't let them grow back for five years.

Occasionally I would read on the odd problem page about people pulling their hair out but assumed it didn't apply to me because I wasn't pulling from my scalp.

I felt like I was the only person in the world that was doing it and I hated not knowing why. I wanted eyelashes more than anything.

Kids at school would tease me, I was 'the girl with no eyelashes', so I would make up some stupid story about why I didn't have any. It still hurts now.

I started wearing make-up at 13 to try and cover it up. I don't know how I coped before then, and would never dream of going out without it on. It is very important to me.

When I was about 14, I decided to try and give up by taking a one day at a time approach.

After about six weeks, I was still pulling at them but it was noticeable that they had grown

back. It was through sheer willpower alone.

I ended up doing it more and more, though, and eventually pulled them all out again. That cycle would repeat itself over the years – I would let them grow again before slowly pulling them all out.

Out of the blue, a couple of years ago, I was surfing the Internet and came across a website called Trichotillomania Support UK. Without a doubt it was the best thing I have ever found.

I cried my eyes out with relief, I wasn't the only person doing it!

There was a recognised disorder called trichotillomania, I read, which caused individuals to pull out hair from anywhere on their bodies – most commonly from their scalp or their eyelashes.

I have been having therapy from the lady who runs the site ever since, via email. She is pull-free but has trichotillomania, so she knows what I am going through and it has helped so much.

■ Continued over page

COVER STORY

By talking it through, I have been able to identify what triggers it, and have learnt to plan for these times to minimise the risk of me pulling. I've realised I pull when I'm tired, stressed, bored or not feeling well.

Sugar, caffeine and certain types of food can also trigger it. If I'm not getting enough exercise or feeling disorganised can also be a big factor. When it happens, I can feel in my mind that tension is building. My eyes get itchy, sometimes unbearably so, and it feels like the only way to relieve it is to pull my eyelashes out.

I almost get lost in a trance. It feels good to start with because it takes my mind off whatever I'm worrying about, but only briefly. The negative feelings always quickly kick in.

Like many people, I have my own little ritual. I roll the hair between my thumb and finger to feel it – the thicker, the better – it's strangely comforting. Making sure I have my hands occupied helps. I have lots of stress balls around my flat and I am constantly putting hand cream and nail varnish on.

Doing exercise is a great way to get rid of wanting to pull. I always try to keep myself busy but also make sure I have time to pamper myself.

The urge to do it comes and goes. Since starting therapy I have had some great pull-free runs – four months is the longest so far.

I still have setbacks from time to time but now I can learn from them and move on. Each one makes me stronger.

There are some people who use the website who have been pull-free for years and that's really inspiring to see. I do believe I will be permanently pull-free one day. When I'm not doing it makes me feel so much better in myself and more confident. I feel like I'm in control of it rather than it being in control of me.

It's still really hard at times but just knowing that I'm not going crazy makes it a lot easier to deal with."

■ To find out more about Trichotillomania Support UK, visit trichotillomania.co.uk

FACTFILE

■ Trichotillomania is an impulse control disorder, which compels a person to pull out hair, eyelashes and/or eyebrows.

■ There are thought to be as many as two million people with trichotillomania in the UK.

■ It is most common among women and is linked to obsessive compulsive disorder.

■ Some people suck, chew or eat the hair or bite off the root. It can lead to baldness.

■ 'Trichster' is the affectionate term for a person who has trichotillomania.

■ Trichotillomania Support UK is a non-profit making organisation which aims to increase awareness and education about the disorder.

Beat the surgeon's knife

MILLIONS of Brits feel their bodies could do with an extreme makeover - almost half of adults – 44 per cent – would consider cosmetic surgery, according to Mintel research.

But before you even think about braving the surgeon's knife, put beauty's non nip-tuck alternatives to the test. Whether it's boosting your assets, tackling lumps and bumps or zapping wrinkles, there's sure to be a solution. Here's three.