

# Trichotillomania

## neurological hair pulling disorder affects millions of Americans

By Grace Gibney

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I started pulling when I was five years old. Ironically, it was during the middle of church, and all I could think about was the tiny eyelash pinched between my fingers.

I have Trichotillomania (Trich, for short), a compulsive disorder where I pull out my eyelashes. A "trichster" feels compelled to pull out any hair on his/her body: head, eyelashes, eyebrows, arms, legs, armpits, etc. It took years to realize that Trichotillomania was more common than I thought, and there were others like me who understood what I was going through.

According to trich.org, about two to four percent of the U.S. population has Trichotillomania, which is anywhere between two to 10 million Americans. People of all ages, genders, and ethnicities can have it. Trich can start at any age, but generally signs begin to show in younger children or when pre-teens hit puberty.

Trichotillomania is a neurological disorder, possibly genetic. A person does not simply choose to pull: it's literally a part of his/her chemical make-up.

Let's do the math: of Borah's 1200-1400 student population, anywhere between 25 to 56 students here on campus have Trich.

In spite of their invisibility to others, there are many ways trichsters reach out to one another.

One way I connect is through a closed group on Facebook titled "Teens With Trich." We discuss our struggles with pulling along with other endeavors in



Photo By Hailey Paine

Hailey Paine pulls back her hair to reveal patches inflicted by Trichotillomania.

our lives: friends, parents, college, etc.

When I mentioned this story, several on-line trichsters were willing to be interviewed. Although we are open and honest with each other, most pullers are sensitive about others outside of Facebook knowing they have Trich.

"I don't spread Trich awareness because I am currently not 'out,'" said Daisy Wolford, who pulls out her eyelashes, eyebrows, and head hair. "Only about 20 people outside of my family know about my Trich, and I plan on keeping it that way for a very long time. I am terrified of the judgement and lack of acceptance that you hear about from others with Trich."

There is no cure for Trich, no pill or shot that can make a trichster stop pulling. However, several individuals have found progress through therapy, obsessive compulsive medications, and support groups. Sometimes finding community among fellow pullers is the greatest cure.

Trichster Claire Cameron speaks openly about her pulling in hopes that she can raise awareness. She has spoken publicly about her struggles with Trich, specifically when she was featured in J-14 magazine's January 2012 issue and posted a YouTube video titled "It's a Trichy Life." She encourages teens to watch and share her video.

"I think it is important for people who don't have Trich to know how much a person actually suffers," said Cameron. "Trich may not physically kill you, but it is important for others to know that there are dangers that come along with the disorder."

Trichotillomania is personal. Emotions run so deep that many trichsters have problems accepting themselves for who they are. Many of these pullers deal with anxiety along with bullying and negative peer pressure. But this is not the case for everyone.

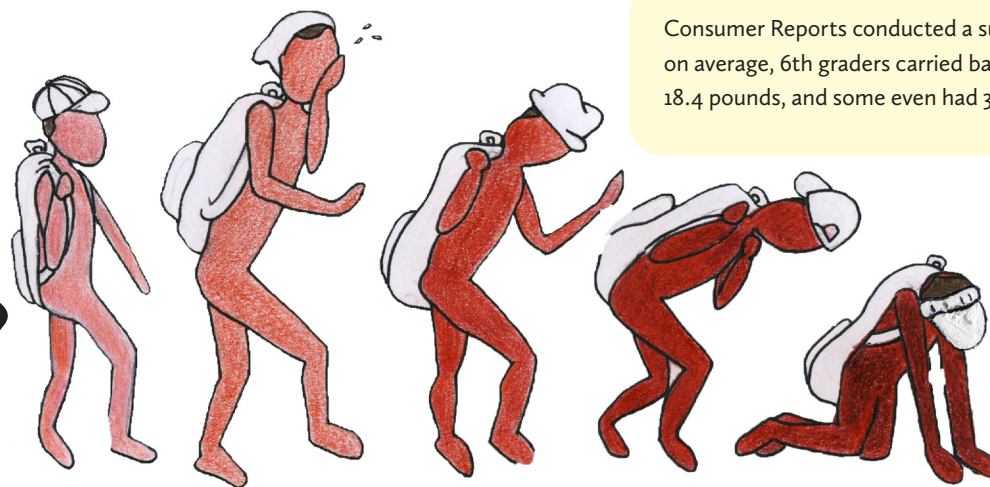
"It's not something that bothers me," said a Borah student with Trichotillomania for whom The Borah Senator has chosen to use a pseudonym to protect the student's identity. "When I used to care, it lowered my self-esteem and I was miserable. I'm not emotional about it anymore. I don't embrace it, but it's not something that brings me down anymore."

In my personal experience, most people I have told about my pulling simply don't understand -- why would someone ever want to pull out their own hair?

"It sounds rude, but when people ask why I do [pull] and don't understand why, I say it's kind of like cutting or even being addicted to drugs . . . it takes your mind off of things, keeps your hands busy and calms you down," said Hailey Paine, a head hair puller. "But I guess those things are a choice. Trich isn't a choice. It's almost a disease . . . most of the time I don't even realize I'm doing it and I'll look down and see hair in my hands."

For more information about Trichotillomania, visit trich.org.

## Back pack blues?



Consumer Reports conducted a survey and found on average, 6th graders carried backpacks weighing 18.4 pounds, and some even had 30 pound packs

58 percent of orthopedists report seeing children complaining about back and shoulder pain caused by heavy backpacks

The American Chiropractic Association recommends that a backpack weigh no more than 10-15 percent of a person's body weight

Backpack injuries account for nearly 10,000 hospital visits each year

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