

Editor's note: This English translation was done by a third party. The original digital story can be accessed [here](#).

European Medicines Agency reviews drug believed to induce suicidal ideation By Esther Armora

Andrologists and urologists are alerted to an increasing number of patients suffering from erectile dysfunction due to finasteride use

In February 2025, the EMA will render a decision on withdrawing the drug from the market

Both his father and grandfather died without a single hair on their heads. It was a fate that came decades after bald spots first appeared.

With such a family history, Carlos Rerucha, even at the age of 25, began worrying about certain areas of his scalp that were often "clearing out."

Family members and friends told him about an effective solution to stop incipient baldness: a "safe" alternative to hair transplants. It happened, in 2021, when, following the recommendation of a dermatologist, this young Madrilenian started taking finasteride (marketed as Propecia), a medicine that began to come to market in the 90s as a treatment for benign hyperplasia of the prostate (BHP). But over the years, the drug proved effective in maintaining hair by stopping its loss at the source.

Finasteride inhibits the 5-alpha-reductase enzyme, which transforms testosterone (T) into dihydrotestosterone (DHT), the hormone responsible for acne, prostate growth, and receding of hair follicles. By inhibiting this enzyme, the medicine also reduces the levels of circulating DHT, and slows hair loss.

Currently prescribed to combat the two processes (enlarged prostate and baldness), finasteride is associated, in about 2% of all men who take it, with decreased libido, decreased ejaculation, and erectile dysfunction. Some scientific publications have also linked it to severe depression and suicidal thoughts. In recent years, cases have also been reported in which the adverse effects persist even after patients stop taking the drug, which is known as post-finasteride syndrome (SPF).

Last October, the European Medicines Agency (EMA) launched an investigation into suspected links between therapy with the drug and suicidal tendencies. The probe, led by the EMA's Pharmacovigilance Risk Assessment Committee (PRAC), will close in February 2025, when the agency will issue a recommendation on whether marketing authorizations for these medicines should be maintained, modified, suspended or withdrawn in the European Economic Area (EEA).

Carlos Rerucha, president of the Plataforma de Afectados por Finasteride (PAF), was dealt a losing hand: He suffers from post-finasteride syndrome.

"This drug robbed me of my life. I'm 29 years old and I don't feel anything," Carlos tells ABC. Severe insomnia, self-esteem problems, loss of libido, erectile dysfunction, depression and suicidal ideation are some of the side effects he has experienced in the past two years, during which time he's been in and out of psychiatric wards.

"I don't want to live. I just put up with this burden," says the young man who dreams of returning to normal in his sexual relationships.

"Everything started to spin out of control"

When Carlos went to a dermatologist seeking a solution for his alopecia he was promised "obvious results", and the doctor didn't lie. Finasteride can be effective in slowing hair loss. The doctor also informed him of possible side effects, but she assured him they could be reversed by quitting the medication. Alas, that was a lie.

There have been at least 22,654 reports of adverse reactions to finasteride, which in some cases result in abandoning the treatment, according to data supplied by the Post-finasteride Syndrome Foundation (<https://www.pfsfoundation.org>). Additionally, a total of 56 countries have issued warnings about the existence of these persistent reactions. Carlos took a 1 mg tablet (the indicated dose of the drug to combat hair loss; when prescribed for BPH, it increases to 5 mg), combined with minoxidil, a vasodilator that improves blood flow to the hair follicles.

At the beginning of the treatment, he began experiencing changes in his sexual desire. So the doctor lowered the dosage until his libido returned to normal, and then raised the dosage back up. Later on, Carlos was prescribed finasteride 5 mg tablets, which he cut himself into 1 mg pieces for his daily intake.

"That's when everything started to spin out of control. It was difficult to divide the doses exactly and one day I took too little and another day I took too much," he recalls.

At the end of 2022, Carlos noticed changes in his mood for the first time. It was the prelude to his "descent into hell," he says.

"I felt like I'd been castrated"

In November 2022, "everything went wrong. I started to feel changes in my mood, aphonia and erectile dysfunction problems. The drug was affecting me psychologically, because it deregulates the synthesis of neurosteroids and neurotransmitters."

But the "shock," as he defines it, came on December 23. "I felt like I'd been castrated, I had severe insomnia, I lost muscle mass, my anxiety was getting worse. All of that undermined my self-esteem. The sexual problems weren't the worst of it. The worst of it was the drug's psychological effects. "Everything went to hell," Carlos recalls.

He had lost control of his life, even though he had not taken finasteride for months. A specialist recommended that he quit the drug, but it was too late.

“Two years have now passed, and I’m still suffering from the side effects, although I’ve improved emotionally with tough therapy sessions,” says Carlos, who in 2023 was admitted twice to a psychiatric clinic because he was determined to end his life.

“Hair was the least of my worries. I’d put my life at risk by saving my hair. I wanted to die, no doctor believed me and I saw no solution,” says the young man. His case is just one of the 500 registered cases on the platform that he oversees.

Concern among andrologists

Andrologists and urologists consulted by ABC warn about the “abuse” that dermatologists do by prescribing this drug to combat alopecia, and the possibility “irreversible consequences” on the physical and psychological health of people who take it.

“Patients cannot be fooled into thinking that if they experience any side effects, they simply stop taking the pill. In most cases it is like this, but there are patients who want the treatment and follow the symptoms,” Josep Torremadé, head of the Andrology Unit of the Urological Service of the Hospital Clinic of Barcelona, tells ABC.

The andrologist confirms the boom in patients under 50 years of age with alopecia problems who use the treatment. “I see more and more men who come to my office with erectile dysfunction problems who take finasteride,” says Torremadé, who also acknowledges the existence of PFS. Given the risks of the treatment, he recommends “alternative hair therapies” and demands that dermatologists “inform patients about the risks associated with taking the drug.”

Iván Schwartzmann, member of the Urology Unit of the Fundación Puigvert de Barcelona, agrees with the clinic’s expert that “the existence of adverse effects in some persistent cases should not be hidden from patients.” He also advises dermatologists not to consider finasteride as a first choice. “It’s clear, and even the package insert specifies this, that finasteride can cause erectile dysfunction, loss of libido, anxiety and depression, suicidal thoughts, etc.,” he says. For this reason, the urologist stresses the importance of “the doctor who prescribes it informing the patient that it is not a harmless drug.”

Ignacio Moncada, president of the Spanish Association of Andrology, Sexual and Reproductive Medicine, is more cautious regarding the impact of the drug on sexual function.

“It can influence libido but there is no clear physiopathological mechanism that links it to erection problems. In this sense, I believe that it has more harmful effects than pharmacological,” points out Moncada, head of the Urology Service at the Hospital de la Zarzuela in Madrid. He admits that “It’s a topic in discussion and that there is clinical observation of the effects, although in some respects, there is no clear evidence of the pharmacological effect.”

Dermatologists consulted by ABC about the general indications of this medicine in cases of androgenic alopecia recognize possible side effects. “Look at the drug’s technical data sheet. We must inform patients of its risks, and let them decide,” says Anna López, a dermatologist at the Hospital de Sant Pau de Barcelona.

Remember that adverse effects appear in a lower number of patients, although the existence of post-finasteride syndrome is recognized.

“The majority of dermatologists give all the information to their patients,” says López. However, many patients—most of them treated in clinics that provide aesthetic care—deny having been informed by their doctors about possible irreversible effects.

Carlos, now 31 years old, is still ill, and has given up on returning to his previous self. He recommends that those who are thinking of taking finasteride seek help to boost their self-esteem rather than putting their lives at risk.

“If only I could go back in time,” he laments.