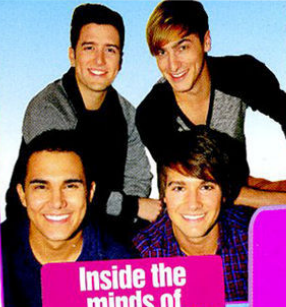


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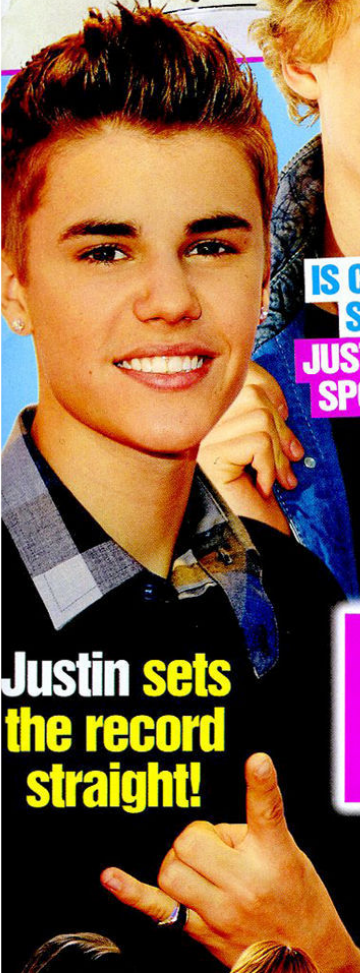
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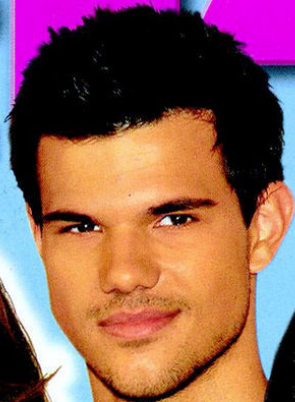


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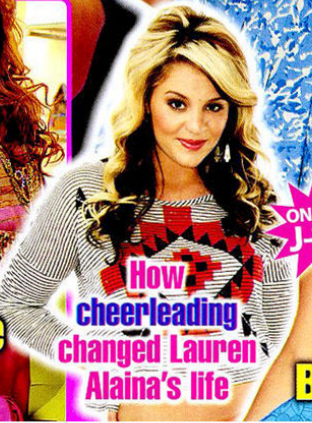
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It started with a single strand, but soon...

# "I couldn't stop pulling out my hair"

One day in fifth grade, Claire Cameron of Calgary, Alberta, Canada, absentmindedly twirled a strand of hair around her finger and pulled it out. Then she pulled another. And another. Every day she had the urge to pull a little more.

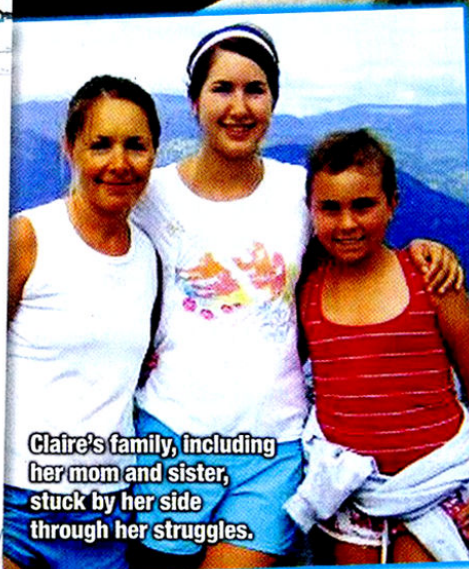
After a few months, what once seemed like a silly habit began to consume her entire life. "I pulled my hair in class, at the computer, in bed, in the bath, doing homework, and in the car. Basically, all day," she tells J-14. "Even just watching TV or reading a book would make me want to pull."

Her long, golden brown hair became thinner and thinner and soon Claire was forced to wear bandanas and synthetic wigs to hide her bald spots. "I was so confused," she says. "I kept trying to stop pulling, but I never could."

## "I didn't want to be bald"

She visited countless doctors searching for answers. "None of the doctors had a 'magic pill' to make me quit pulling," she says. "Sometimes they would just tell me to stop, and I was like, 'If I could, I would!'"

Doctors prescribed dozens of medications and at one point Claire was taking 36 pills a day. Nothing helped. In fact, some of the pills made things worse. "They made me gain weight and I lost all my



Claire's family, including her mom and sister, stuck by her side through her struggles.

"I looked in the mirror and saw a freak."

confidence," Claire says. "I was so frustrated that I wanted to just give up on everything." The stress and emotional side effects of pulling even forced Claire to quit the one thing she loved most — riding horses. "That's when I really started to get depressed," she says.

Claire stopped hanging out with her friends and spent hours a day locked in her room. Feeling hope-

Claire's natural hair has almost all grown back now. And when she gets the urge to pull, she uses silly putty and magnets to keep her hands busy.

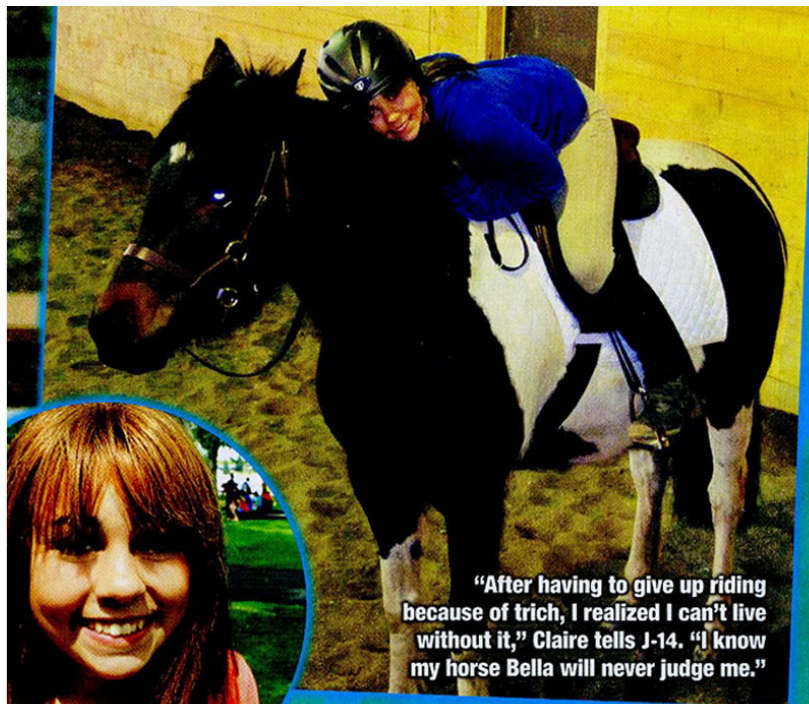
less and alone, she continued to pull out all of her hair until she was almost completely bald. "I looked in the mirror and saw a freak — a girl with dark circles under her eyes who never had a real smile on her face," she tells J-14. "I didn't want to be bald. There were nights that I would just bawl for hours asking, 'Why does this have to happen to me?'"

## Breaking point

When Claire had to spend her 12th birthday at yet another doctor's office instead of celebrating with her friends, something inside her snapped. "It was one of the worst days ever," she says. "I just couldn't take it anymore. I cried and cried while my mom held me in her arms."

Determined to find a solution, Claire's mom searched online and learned about an impulse control disorder called trichotillomania (commonly called "trich") that causes obsessive hair pulling. It described Claire's condition perfectly and right away, they knew this was exactly what the doctors had failed to diagnose.





"After having to give up riding because of trich, I realized I can't live without it," Claire tells J-14. "I know my horse Bella will never judge me."

When Claire first started pulling, she hid her bald spots with bandanas, wigs, and hair systems, like this one.

Claire began to see specialists who helped her work through her emotional issues and feel like her old self, but she still needed to find a way to quit pulling. "I knew I could be happy if I could just stop," she says.

### "I can't turn back now!"

Luckily, her family heard about Hair Club For Kids, a non-profit organization that provides free hair restoration services to kids and teens suffering from cancer, alopecia, trich, and other illnesses that cause hair loss.

They fitted Claire with a special hair system that looked more natural than the synthetic wigs she'd been

wearing. And because it was attached with layers of tape and glue, the system prevented Claire from pulling her real hair.

After two years battling trich, Claire suddenly felt like she could start to live her life again. "My hair started to grow back and I really began to think that I could get better." She was able to ride horses again and spend her energy concentrating on school and friends, rather than on her hair.

Claire is now 15 and has been pull-free for more than a year. Most of her natural hair has grown back, and she no longer needs to wear a hair system.

"I'm almost grateful for what I went through because now I can help other kids battling trich realize they're not alone," Claire tells J-14. "I still get the urge to pull sometimes, but I know that I can't turn back now."

## Understanding Trichotillomania

- Trich affects between two and 10 million Americans.
- The first signs of trich most commonly appear between the ages of nine and 13.
- In addition to the hair on their heads, some people with trich compulsively pull out their eyelashes, eyebrows, and body hair.

For more information, visit:

- Trichotillomania Learning Center, [trich.org](http://trich.org)
- Hair Club for Kids, [hairclub.com/hc-for-kids](http://hairclub.com/hc-for-kids)

## Lady Gaga helped me stop pulling

After pulling out almost all of her hair, 16-year-old Heather Rotman of Duxbury, MA, shares how she found the strength to stop with a little help from Lady Gaga.

"When I was 10, I woke up in the middle of a sleepover and started pulling out my eyebrows. I had never pulled before, but it felt like an anxiety release. But when I had pulled them completely out, I felt ashamed. I went in the bathroom, found an eyeliner pencil, and frantically filled in where my eyebrows had been so that no one would notice. After that, I couldn't stop pulling every day.

Soon, I had pulled out all of my eyelashes and moved on to my hair. I'd pull out clumps of hair and hide it under my rug so my parents wouldn't get suspicious. Every morning, I spent hours painting on my eyebrows and eyelashes. I wore wigs and bandanas to hide my bald spots, but I still got bullied. Kids threw erasers at me and mocked me, saying, 'Oh Heather, you look so hot today.' My friends slowly began to drift away and by seventh grade, they had all ditched me. It was so emotionally stressful for me that I had zero confidence and became depressed.

But in 10th grade, I started listening to Lady Gaga's music and learning more about her. I saw how she reaches out to kids and tells them that it's okay to be themselves. She's so accepting of everyone that she really inspired me. My confidence returned, my grades improved, and I began to pull my hair less.

I've been pull-free for a year now. Last April, I took my wig off for the last time. I recently started posting YouTube videos talking about my experiences with trich.

It's amazing to get messages from people I don't know saying I've helped them.

I don't think I ever appreciated my hair until I had pulled it all out. But through it all, I've learned that I'm so much more than just my hair. What's on the outside doesn't define who I am."

