

The 37th Annual National Alopecia Areata Foundation International Conference

June 30-July 3, 2022

Patients with alopecia areata and their families gathered for the 37th annual National Alopecia Areata Foundation (NAAF) International Conference to learn about the latest developments in treating alopecia areata firsthand from top medical experts.

Held at the Hyatt Regency Washington on Capitol Hill, the meeting spanned four days and included question-and-answer sessions with doctors, empowerment activities, a camp for kids with alopecia areata, and other social events such as a baseball game, movie screening, and dance party.

Below, our postconference wrap-up summarizes some of the highlights of the meeting.

Reunited, and it feels so good

The theme of this year's conference was "a community reunited" because it was the first in-person NAAF conference since 2019 due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and it did not disappoint.

"Patients who have a very visible condition like alopecia areata really need to see other people with the condition," said Gary Sherwood, NAAF communications director. "This conference is so life-changing because once people attend, they realize 'there are so many others like me' and 'I am not alone.'"

The overarching goal of this conference is to connect people with alopecia areata and help them to live their best lives. The Children's Conference Camp is open to children, tweens, and teens with alopecia areata aged 5 to 17 years old. "The kids' camp is so impactful because it allows kids to be among other people like themselves and make friends that last for life," Sherwood said. In fact, he added, a couple who met at the camp as kids is now married.

Special guest star

This year's conference had a surprise guest: Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley (D-Massachusetts). Pressley has alopecia areata and has been vocal about it. "She is a great presenter and spoke from her own emotions and experience," Sherwood said. Pressley answered the crowd's questions on ways to effectively raise money and awareness for alopecia areata.

Conference attendees also got the chance to participate in an awareness walk around Washington, D.C., and screen a movie called FOXY with a question-and-answer session with director Trista Suke, who also has alopecia areata.

JAK inhibitors take center stage

There are other reasons that the mood at the conference was so buoyant, Sherwood said. "We finally have the first drug ever approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for alopecia areata," he explained. The FDA gave its coveted nod to baricitinib, an oral Janus kinase (JAK) inhibitor for adults with severe alopecia areata, in June 2022. JAK inhibitors block certain enzymes that may contribute to inflammatory activity in the body. This class of medications is also being used for and studied in many other autoimmune and inflammatory conditions, including psoriasis, rheumatoid arthritis, atopic dermatitis, vitiligo, and others.

Brett King, M.D., Ph.D., an associate professor of dermatology at the Yale School of Medicine in New Haven, Connecticut, pioneered the use of JAK inhibitors in dermatology. He gave the keynote address at the conference. "He was phenomenal," Sherwood said. King discussed the research leading up to the approval of baricitinib as well as what the future holds for JAK inhibitors.

Other highlights included a talk by King's wife, Brittany Craiglow, M.D., a pediatric dermatologist at Yale-New Haven Hospital. Craiglow discussed the similarities and differences in treating alopecia areata for kids and adults. There are currently no FDA-approved treatments for alopecia areata in kids, but certain drugs, including JAK inhibitors, can be used off-label in the pediatric alopecia areata population, she said.

There is also some activity in the pipeline. Ritlecitinib, a JAK inhibitor, is in late-stage clinical trials for alopecia areata in kids aged 12 years and older. "We also hope to see baricitinib in trials for pediatrics," Craiglow said.

There is likely a window of opportunity for treatment with JAK inhibitors, she noted. “If you haven’t had any hair for more than eight to 10 years, your chance of regrowth with a JAK inhibitor starts to decrease,” she explained. “Intralesional steroids are effective in adults with limited disease, but kids and needles don’t mix very well, and there aren’t a ton of tools in our tool chest, especially for doctors who don’t routinely treat alopecia.”

Minoxidil, which has been used more frequently in androgenetic alopecia, can be very effective in adult and pediatric alopecia areata too, and it is well-tolerated, according to Craiglow. There is also a growing body of evidence supporting a role for dupilumab in some cases of alopecia areata.

“People with alopecia areata who are atopic and have elevated immunoglobulin E are more apt to respond to dupilumab,” she said. “For a subset of patients with this phenotype of atopic dermatitis plus or minus asthma, dupilumab is a reasonable option and can also be covered by insurance for these individuals.” Dupilumab is FDA-approved to treat eczema and asthma in kids and adults.

Researchers hopeful about treatment for alopecia areata

Exactly what causes alopecia areata is still unknown. “It’s largely genetic, but we don’t understand the triggers, and they are likely multifactorial and different in different people,” Craiglow said. “We understand the cells that are involved and how they communicate, but we don’t know why and when they communicate.”

Alopecia areata waxes and wanes by nature. “It’s unpredictable, and that is really hard for patients because even when you are doing well, you’re worried about what’s to come,” she explained.

But, she added, now there is hope. “I really do believe in five to 10 years, alopecia areata will become like psoriasis where we have a toolbox of drugs to offer patients that can get them where they want to be,” Craiglow noted.

All in all, the meeting was a huge success, agreed new NAAF President and CEO Nicole Friedland. “There is so much bravery and heart in this community and they gain tremendous energy from being together,” she said. “We had much to celebrate including NAAF’s 40th anniversary and the first-ever FDA-approved treatment for severe alopecia areata.”