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## **Kept His Hair, Lost His Sex Drive**

**Finasteride was once considered a miracle cure for hair loss. But soon libido disorders and other serious side effects were discovered. Now it's going to court.**

**By Christina Berndt**

*Editor's note: This English translation was done by a third party. The original report can be accessed at [SonntagsZeitung online](#).*

A pill has destroyed Thomas Meier. It's small, it's pink and it was supposed to help him with something silly: hair loss.

In the very early stage, at just 32 years old, the wavy, dark-blond hair of the businessman from North Rhine Westphalia began thinning. He asked his doctor if there were something he could do and the doctor said yes, then presented two alternatives: foam or pills. But the pills, the doctor noted, would help better.

Thomas Meier (whose name was changed for this story) decided to take the pink pill with the active ingredient finasteride. His hair got a little bit thicker, but at the same time, unpleasant things started happening. "I was having erectile problems" explained Meier, now 36.

Later on, this was followed by loss of libido, depression and panic attacks. Today Meier suffers from pain in his abdomen and shrunken testicles. Plus, his sperm count is down to nearly zero. His nighttime sleep got so bad that he can now only work part-time.

According to him and his physician, all of this can be traced back to the little pill. Meier is suffering from the post-finasteride syndrome, says Professor Dr. Michael Zitzmann, an expert from the University Hospital in Münster. Although the patient stopped taking the pill a long time ago, the serious side effects remain.

Meier, who hasn't had a girlfriend since [quitting finasteride], decided to sue the manufacturer. He belongs to a small group of people in Germany who have been negatively impacted, although the actual number is not yet known because many men still feel ashamed to talk about it. After all, it's erectile dysfunction, caused by a medicine they took for hair loss. It's different in the US, where thousands have already come together. They are all outraged that nobody warned them and that the side effects won't stop after discontinuation.

In January the first negotiation will be held in Germany in the District Court of Berlin. The main questions will be: What exactly was known by the pharmaceutical companies at which time? And were patients adequately informed?

### **Medical-law experts: Producers will deny everything**

Jörg Heynemann, a medical-law expert from Berlin, has already filed four sample lawsuits against two manufacturers of finasteride: MSD and Dermapharm, but it won't be easy. The manufacturers will use the same strategy as always, says Heynemann. They dispute the correct use of the drug by the affected patients, they deny the existence of the post-finasteride

syndrome and, according to them, if PFS really does exist, then only those suing are the ones suffering from the side effects. Dermapharm won't give a statement about the ongoing process and MSD assures us that post-finasteride syndrome hasn't been actually proven yet.

Attorney Heynemann still believes in the success of the litigation, because in July, the European Court of Justice enforced the rights of patients. They are no longer responsible to prove that the medicine has caused them problems. The new laws now only require that there is a high probability of a link between the disease and the drug.

The fact that finasteride impacts sexuality and mood does not come as a surprise. The product suppresses an enzyme that changes testosterone into the more powerful DHT. The reduction of DHT stops androgenetic hair loss but at the same time causes the testicles and the prostate to shrink. DHT also suppresses neurotransmitters in the brain, that are responsible for regulating the sexual function, mood, and thinking, says andrologist Zitzmann. But could this effect last after discontinuation? Wolfgang Bäcker from Infodienst Arznei Telegramm says that this is not so unusual. Permanent damage also occurs with other kinds of medication. For example, it also happens with the malaria medicine Mefloquine.

Scientists assume that epigenetic processing might be the reason for post-finasteride syndrome. The intake of such drugs for years leads to a permanent change in gene activity. That is the reason why the side effects remain.

### **The consequences were recognized quickly**

Finasteride was used at the beginning of the 90s for enlarged prostate. But then a positive side effect was discovered. The drug was causing men to grow fuller heads of hair. So, in 1998, MSD put finasteride in a small dosage onto the market as a hair-loss remedy. Very quickly the medicine was known for being hope for bald people and was even celebrated as "enjoyment of life from the lab."

Sadly, early studies indicated that finasteride would bring less joy and more sorrow. According to one from 1991, finasteride users were three times more prone to develop mental health problems than men in the control group. After the market launch, these side effects were undeniable, so they were included in the leaflet along with the risk of sexual dysfunction. In July 2018 the manufacturers ultimately added to the leaflets that the sexual side effects were nonreversible even after discontinuation.

And yet the medicine is still available on the market as a hair-loss remedy. The benefit-risk ratio is still considered positive enough to keep it on the market, states the Federal Institute for Pharmaceuticals and Medical Products. But doctors are required to weigh the suffering of their patients against the risks. In Switzerland, an estimated 100,000 men take the pink pill. Around two percent (about 2,000 men) suffer from side effects.

The affected patients were taking the drug in good faith at the beginning. Even if they had been warned by their physician that the drug might cause impotence, they were comforted in the thought that they could simply discontinue the drug. But that was not the case. Some men found themselves suffering from the side effects even more severely after they had stopped than during the finasteride therapy.

This is the case with Thomas Meier. By the end of 2016 he suffered a complete breakdown, with depression and suicidal thoughts.

Michael Zitzmann has so far treated more than 150 post-finasteride syndrome patients. He is able to help most of them with hormones, says the andrologist, but the success of the treatment might take years to show results.

Thomas Meier hasn't lost hope yet. He is still young, even though he often feels like an old man.

Like an old man with a bald head.