It’s a Man Thing Too

Black men’s hair and shaving issues can ruin their self-esteem and cost them their jobs. And you thought only women had bad hair days.

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It’s a common assumption that men, in general, are unconcerned about their hair and skin care problems. But that stereotype’s not true for all men. Just ask Will Williams, a master barber with M&M Products, the maker of Bump Patrol and other ethnic hair and skin care items.

“Hair is an essential part of a black man’s identity,” he says. “From childhood, hair and hair style are key to a black man’s image.”

When it comes to this topic, most black men are concerned with two key areas: hair loss and facial hair removal. Let’s explore these two problems, their causes and the healthiest solutions.

Ingrown hairs/razor bumps. Perhaps the most aggravating and pervasive problems for black men are ingrown hairs and razor bumps caused by shaving. For all men, this daily grooming ritual may result in the arrival of those dreaded razor bumps—technically, it’s a medical condition called pseudofolliculitis barbae (PFB). For black men, these pimply pustules, if left untreated, may become inflamed and infected. Even worse, these unsightly blemishes can permanently scar the skin.

The tightly coiled structure of black hair makes African-American men more susceptible to getting ingrown hairs. The process of shaving can make the ends of hair sharp. This pointed hair can easily penetrate the skin and curl back in, causing inflammation and infection.

The resulting skin condition can give perceptions of poor hygiene and grooming practices. In addition, PFB can also cause shadowing (hyperpigmentation) on the face, under the beard and on the scalp.

And for many black men who must wear uniforms on the job or who must look businesslike, such an unsightly appearance can cost them their jobs and promotions. “Whether it’s the military, police or fire department or the corporate world, facial hair is just not acceptable in upper management,” says master barber John Campbell of Shaver’s Choice.

Not to mention that black men, like anybody else, care about how they look. As dermatologist

Cheryl Burgess, MD, president of the Center for Dermatology and Dermatologic Surgery in Washington, DC, says: “Just as acne impacts the self-esteem of teenagers, any imperfection in the skin is of concern to those who suffer from the condition.”

Over the years, many skin care products created to treat the problem have actually made the situation worse. “They worked to exfoliate skin using acids and alcohol to expose a trapped hair,” Campbell says. “That is painful and causes more skin problems.”

To save men’s skin from shaving woes, depilatories—hair-melting acids—have been promoted as a method that’s “friendlier” to skin than a razor. But repeatedly exposing your skin to these chemicals can cause greater problems. “If depilatories are used long enough,” Campbell says, “they cause almost irreversible damage.”

So what’s a brother who prefers to go beardless supposed to do? The easiest solution would be to cut down the number of times you shave, but this is not always possible. Burgess offers this tip: “Use a single- blade razor or clippers to cut the hair short above the skin.”

“Keep skin moisturized and shave the beard in the same direction that the hairs are growing,” Williams adds. Many men shave against the grain, which is incorrect. He also suggests having a barber “map” your face. “Face mapping determines the direction in which you should shave so that it’s consistent with beard growth.” (Campbell, however, counters that the problem is not the direction the hair is growing, but the curly nature of the hair.)

In terms of which products to use, Campbell suggests those with ingredients that lift hair off the skin. That way, when a razor or clipper cuts the facial hair, it leaves blunt-tipped hairs rather than pointed, knife-like hair tips more likely to penetrate back into the skin.

“The most important advice we can give anyone is to ask their barber or employees in a beauty supply shop what the products do to your hair and skin,” says Campbell, stressing to seek a licensed professional. “Acids and alcohol are damaging to hair and skin and need to be avoided,” he notes. “Stick with products that include high-quality vitamins and oils that are friendly to our skin.”

Hair loss. Although many conditions can cause hair loss, male-pattern hair baldness (thinning at the temples and at the crown) is the most common for men of all races. The bald look has become increasingly popular thanks to celebrities such as Michael Jordan. But since not all men’s heads are well-shaped domes that look good without hair, this issue is a huge concern for men in general.

“My hair sheds because of the genes I inherited from my father and grandfather, who both had thinning hair,” Campbell says. “But little research has been done to determine if there is any greater issue [with this problem] in the black community than among other ethnicities.”

To treat hair loss, docs most often recommend Rogaine (minoxidil) to their patients. Researchers discovered that the high blood pressure drug spurred hair growth as a side effect of treatment.

The discovery led to the development of topical (solution applied to the skin) minoxidil to treat male-pattern baldness. Many users find the product best affects hair growth on the crown of the head, but not at the hairline. Another popular hair-loss drug is Propecia (finasteride). It comes in pill form, but it’s not reimbursed by most health insurers and is costly (the generic version is cheaper). Both Rogaine and Propecia must be used indefinitely to maintain hair growth and thickness.

If these treatments fail, other options include hair transplants, hair pieces and weaves. But, hey, you could always wear a hat.

Stuff We Love
These products are worth every penny.

Ahava for Men Deep Cleansing Gel (3.4 fl. oz., $18)
Perfect pre-shave treatment.

Clarisonic Skin Care System ($195)
Uses sonic technology and massage action to deep clean, stimulate and clarify skin.

PCA Skin Total Wash Face & Body Cleanser (6 fl. oz., $18)
Foaming face and body cleanser keeps his skin smooth and clear.

Head & Shoulders Dry Scalp Care Shampoo (14.2 oz., $4.74) and Conditioner (14.2 oz., $4.74)
Moisturizes scalp and protects hair from damage.

EmerginC Men Liquid Gel Cleanser (150 ml., $35)
Cleanses his skin without overdrying.

EmerginC Men Post-Shave Reinforcer (50 ml., $47)
Improves moisture balance, tone and texture.

Vaseline Men Fast Absorbing Body & Face Lotion (24.5 fl. oz., $5.99)
This lightweight formula instantly relieves dry skin.

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