Let’s Keep It Real Healthy!

It’s fun to experiment with wigs and other add-ons, but don’t forget to care for your own tresses while you try different faux-hair styles.

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Some sisters view their wigs, weaves and extensions as a godsend. These hairstyle methods can instantly change a woman’s appearance, give her damaged hair a rest from chemical processing, and help her transition from chemically treated tresses to her hair’s natural texture. What’s more, these options may even aid hair growth by protecting tresses from heat styling tools and harsh weather.

If you’re considering going from real to faux real, here’s a look at the most popular styling options available and tips that will help keep your natural, God-given hair its healthiest while you try out a man-made mane or other enhanced add-ons.

But before we start, what’s key, says hair loss specialist Toni Love, author of *The World of Wigs, Weaves and Extensions*, is that you select an experienced professional to apply any type of commercial hair. And have the hairstylist examine your hair and scalp to ensure both are ready for the procedure you’ve chosen. If your hair is relaxed, experts suggest indulging your tresses in several deep conditioning treatments before the service. And if hair is in its natural state, professionals recommend one or two of these fortifying treatments.

Wigs

The best thing about these hairpieces is their versatility. What’s more, wigs are a great option for women who don’t want to remain slaves to chemical treatments or who want to give their hair a break from daily styling, says New York City---based hairstylist Shedelle Holmes. “For those who are transitioning [from chemically treated styles], as your hair begins to grow, you can trim the straightened ends until you’re comfortable enough to do the big chop and remove all the relaxed hair.”

But wearing a wig doesn’t mean you can skip taking care of your hair and scalp. “Make sure to wash and condition the hair weekly with a sulfate-free shampoo, and also use a detangling, leave-in conditioner,” suggests Peggy Fuller, MD, of the Esthetics Center for Dermatology in Charlotte, North Carolina. Fuller also recommends wearing low-maintenance styles such as loose plaits and braids, Nubian knots or loose pin curls under the wig to allow the scalp to breathe.

Currently, many women choose to wear popular lace-front or full-lace wigs—hairpieces constructed so that hair looks as if it's growing out of its lace base. But under these wigs—and hairpieces of all types—women should "avoid tight elastic stockings or other protective head coverings that may cause friction and tension on the hairline and nape of the neck and exacerbate hair loss," Fuller warns.

Holmes also cautions lace wig aficionados to be careful. "The excessive use of adhesives, or other bonding agents used to attach these hairpieces to the head, can pull the hair and eventually cause traction alopecia [a type of balding]," Holmes says.

Extensions

Peruse online forums about braided hair, and you'll read numerous stories about severe hair damage women experienced from putting in extensions—a quantity of hair added to one's own for length and volume or to get a new look. One woman revealed what happened when a technician braided too much hair onto her own fine strands: The added hair was too heavy. When she removed her braids, she also lost a handful of her own hair—from the roots.

The big problem with extensions is the hair's weight and the pull it exerts on women's natural tresses. "When added hair is applied or sewn too tight on women's heads, this—along with the weight and volume of the commercial hair—can do great damage to the natural hair, especially if it's thin or fine," Love says. "Once traction alopecia sets in and damages the follicles and scalp, it's hard for hair to bounce back."

But despite these possible problems, when properly used, braided extensions are a great protective style. While wearing these add-ons, wash hair once a week to remove product buildup. And always dry hair thoroughly to prevent bacteria buildup that can cause rot and mildew. Also, if possible use human hair extensions because they're washable. (Synthetic hair isn't water-friendly so it can matte and cause your own strands to break when you try to take out the braids.) And when removing braids from relaxed hair, be careful not to stress tresses at the demarcation point where the difference in texture weakens the hair. Give relaxed and natural hair a rest for at least two weeks before re-braiding. Opt for a very low-maintenance style, or consider wearing a flattering wig.

Weaves

A weave is the process of adding a full head of hair extensions to one's natural tresses by sew-in or glue-in methods. And though dermatologists have knocked poorly applied weaves because of balding risks, this popular styling option can also give hair a rest from chemical treatments or help women transition from relaxed to natural hair.

While dermatologist Brooke Jackson, MD, founder of the Skin Wellness Center of Chicago, finds nothing wrong with wearing weaves and braids, she suggests women don't perm their hair before putting in a weave or braids. What's more, if your hair is already traumatized from using relaxers, Jackson cautions, don't damage tresses even more by putting in a weave.

And if your hair is healthy enough to support a weave, don’t leave it in for more than four to eight weeks. In addition, have it professionally cared for by a stylist. “It’s always good to have your stylist deep condition any visible hair on a weekly basis,” Holmes recommends. “Also, give your hair a break in between weaves, and remember to trim the ends.”

And when it’s time to remove a weave, preferably have it done by a professional who follows the proper removal procedures for sewn- or glued-in hair.

“I’ve had all of these styles,” Jackson admits. “My weave was too tight and made me feel like I was going to become my own patient. No one should need to take Tylenol after a hair appointment!”

Needless to say, when Jackson got her weave removed, she followed her own advice: A professional did it.

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