Damage Control

Styling techniques can harm your hair. Real Health teaches you how to counter the assault.

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Many African-American women are destroying their hair while trying to make it look good. Common grooming practices, such as brushing your hair and using chemical treatments, can weaken follicles, cause breakage and lead to permanent hair loss.

Even common styles such as weaves, braids, cornrows and ponytails cause significant hair loss and thinning. Such styles are called “tension styles,” says Asha McLeod, owner of Jazma Hair in Toronto, Canada, whose salon has worked with such celebrities as Alfre Woodard, Prince and Kerry Washington. “These are styles where great amounts of tension are put on a person’s hair strands in order to create the style,” she explains, adding that the problem becomes more pronounced when the style has been worn for several years.

“Quite often black women come to our salon looking for answers on thinning hair, [particularly] at the hairline and temple areas when they have been wearing a tension hairstyle,” she says. This type of balding is what dermatologists call traction alopecia. “This can occur to areas of the scalp where tension has been placed on the hair follicles–where the roots are located—and they are literally stretched and torn out of the head. If you could see a magnified view of the follicles where this has happened, you would see cellular damage and trauma.” But, McLeod adds, don’t confuse traction alopecia with the 50 to 100 hairs people shed every day as a normal part of the hair growth cycle.

More hair damage can result from chemical processes, such as relaxing. By altering the natural texture of the hair, relaxers weaken the hair, even when properly done. Heat from styling tools further damages already weakened strands of relaxed hair.

“Thermal reconditioning should not be done on black hair,” say Titi and Miko Branch, owners of Miss Jessie’s Salon in Brooklyn. “Ammonium thioglycolate is a chemical that is not completely compatible with black hair. The additional high temperature of flatirons that is used on the hair after it is chemically processed is just way too much heat.”

But you can take steps to prevent or lessen the negative effects of these popular styling methods.

Expert Tips for Minimizing Hair Damage

Use styling tools properly. You don't have to stop using flatirons and other heat appliances—just avoid misusing them, says hair stylist Dana Gibbs of dana's loft HAIR in New York City. (Gibbs's clients include Rihanna and English singer Corinne Bailey Rae.) "It is safe to use them on any texture hair," she says, "but using them on dirty hair or hair with lots of products in it burns the hair and causes it to break."

Avoid excessive and direct heat. Or limit exposure to twice a week. Heat saps needed moisture. When possible, air dry, wet set your hair and use a hood dryer. Do not use a blow-dryer for styling. "If your hair is damaged in any way, you should avoid heat styling as it can further damage the hair shaft," say the Branches. "Any process that requires excessive heat should not be done on black hair because it is fragile and heat can cause breakage."

Adjust tools to hair type. Each individual's hair is unique in many ways, so don't buy a thermal tool that isn't adjustable, says McLeod, making a comparison to ironing clothes: "You would not use the same heat setting on cotton or linen as you would silk."

Avoid too much tension. Do not keep braids in for more than two months, Gibbs says. "Never get your hair braided so tight that you are in pain. This will permanently thin your hair." With weaves, go to a specialist "who will not sacrifice your own hair's health just to give you a look." And remember: There are no cheap fixes. "Most specialists will charge you several hundred dollars," Gibbs adds. "Always have a consultation with the stylist before having this service done."

Employ caution when using chemical relaxers. Overprocessing (leaving relaxer on hair too long), underprocessing and inconsistent processing can all cause breakage, warn the Branch sisters. McLeod advises avoiding "bone-straight relaxers, unless the hair is going to be kept quite short."

Minimize damage from grooming. "Always treat your hair to a moisturizing treatment when you wash it, and wash it at least once a week," Gibbs says. "Don't overdo it with styling products. And always go to a professional on a regular basis for your chemical treatments, weaves or hair cuts."

Stuff We Love
These products are worth every cent.

- Hamadi Shea Hair Cream (4 fl. oz., $23) Its five essential oils, shea butter and rice proteins tame flyaways and dry ends. Moisturizes wavy, curly and kinky hair.
- Just for Me! Hair Milk Straightening Mist (10 fl. oz., $4.99) A luscious heat protectant for your little angel's hair, but you can use it too.
- Pantene Relaxed & Natural Breakage Defense Shampoo (8.4 fl. oz., $5.99) and Conditioner (8.4 fl. oz., $5.99) This RH staff favorite leaves hair soft, silky and strong.
- JASON Thin-to-Thick Scalp Elixir (2 fl. oz., $11.45) This botanical mixture contains biotin and folic

acid to strengthen fine, thin strands.

- Yes to Carrots Hair & Scalp Moisturizing
- Mud Mask (8.45 fl. oz., $12.99), Pampering Carrot Juice Shampoo and Hair Mud Conditioner (each 16.9 fl. oz., $7.99) Beta carotene rich hair food.
- Goody StayPut Thick Elastics (20 pack, $3.99) These strong, textured ponytail holders can keep hair secure during an hourlong dance class and a weight-training session.

TYPE	STYLE	AVOID	STYLING TIPS	CARE & MAINTENANCE
Relaxed	-Short bobs -Long-lasting styles -Roller sets/wraps	-High heat -High lift colors -Tension styles	-Use pin-curl sets -No non-water soluble products (waxes, mineral oils, petrolatum)	-Shampoo dry hair with SLS-free* shampoos -Use satin or silk wraps at night
Curly	-Longer cuts	-Thinning shears -Medium-length cuts	-Air dry or dry with diffuser -Wet daily or spray with	-Use water-based, leave-in products to control frizz -Shampoo weekly with
Wavy	-Roller sets/wraps	-Cutting hair against growth pattern	-Scrunch dry with diffuser -Air dry	-Use leave-in, water-based products
Kinky	-Dreads -Loose braids -Cornrows -Short-medium Afro	-Excessive heat -Bone-straight relaxers -High lift colors -Weaves/extensions -Friction/tension styles -Porous hats/head ties	-Twist to set -Use leave-in, water-based products to moisturize hair	-When worn straight, use SLS-free shampoo -Use satin scarf at night
Coily	-Texturized styles -Loose extensions -Dreads	-Bone-straight relaxers -High lift colors -High heat -Friction/tension styles	-Keep heat source moving	-Use water-based products
Thinning	-Short cuts -Light color or paper- thin highlights (to make hair look thicker) -Short Afro with lighter color -Curly perm (made with small rods)	-Heat -Tension styles -Longer lengths -Dark colors	-Air dry -Roller sets with low heat if under hood	-Use water-based products

Transition	-Braids -Weaves -Wigs	-Strain on hair -Excessive brushing or combing -Rubber bands/ties	-Limit use of curling irons and other tools	-Keep conditioned -Deep condition every two weeks

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