Flake Off!

Although dandruff provides equal opportunity embarrassment for everyone, African Americans shoulder more of the problem.

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All races and ethnicities get dandruff, but according to market research, the itchy, flaky and difficult-to-treat scalp disorder is more prevalent among African Americans than other population groups. What's more, the condition can be particularly challenging for black women because treatment requires daily hair washing—a no-no for fragile, dryness-prone black tresses.

What Causes Dandruff

When the scalp becomes irritated, the body's response is to speed up cell turnover, which causes abnormal shedding of dead skin cells. The excess skin cells clump together into visible, fine, white flakes. One common irritant is malassezia, a fungus already present on the scalp. This fungus feeds on sebum (oils) on the scalp, and, in susceptible individuals, it can grow out of control and lead to dandruff.

In addition, certain illnesses, such as eczema, psoriasis or autoimmune diseases, can cause dandruff. And dry weather, hard tap water, poor diet, dehydration, hormonal changes and overproduction of sebum can also contribute to the condition.

What's more, improper hair care and certain hairstyles and products can make matters worse.

Hairstyles

Tight hairstyles such as braids and extensions can aggravate dandruff problems "by increasing stress to the scalp that results in additional dryness and inflammation," says dermatologist Neal Bhatia, MD, an associate clinical professor at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center in Los Angeles.

In addition, says Latoya Brown, the director of education for the Basic Hair Care product line, "The improper installation and use of hair extensions can cause a breeding ground for hair and scalp problems."

Infrequent Shampooing

“Wearing extensions and braids without weekly or biweekly shampooing is also very hazardous for the hair and scalp,” Brown continues. “This creates a prime situation for fungi and bacteria to develop that can lead to yeast infections of the scalp, or conditions such as seborrheic dermatitis.”

In general, washing the hair less often may cause product buildup and scalp itchiness and irritation, but cleansing is key. “Shampooing keeps bacteria and fungus under control underneath the extensions, soothes the symptoms associated with dry and itchy scalp conditions, removes odor caused by sweat and oil buildup, and also deeply moisturizes and refreshes the hair,” Brown says.

“But in the end these hairstyles compound the problem to the point where it may become necessary to make a choice,” Bhatia says. “Dandruff versus fashion.”

Hair Washing Tips

If you have an active lifestyle or are exposed to higher levels of air pollution, Brown offers this advice. “Wash hair weekly with a well-balanced moisturizing shampoo and conditioning system,” she says. “Weekly shampooing also cuts down on dandruff, bacteria and fungi that are normally produced by excreted hormones, pollutants (internal and external), product buildup, oil buildup, skin infections and infrequent hair washing.”

Brown also adds that some African-American women have hair that tends to be dry and requires more moisture; for healthy scalp and hair, they should choose moisturizing products that don’t cause additional problems. Bhatia notes that oils, pomades and other products made with similar ingredients might exacerbate dandruff and dryness that can result in more scaling.

Dandruff-Relieving Ingredients

To relieve dandruff and to moisturize the scalp, try coconut or olive oil. In addition, to reduce fungi, it’s helpful to spritz apple cider vinegar onto the scalp and then rinse it off. Another natural remedy for dandruff is tea tree oil (found in Basic Hair Care’s Carbon Tea Tree shampoo).

But if dandruff is persistent despite regular shampooing, you may need to switch to a medicated dandruff shampoo containing one of the following ingredients: zinc pyrithione, tar (coal tar), selenium sulfide, salicylic acid or ketoconazole. When dandruff is very resistant, Bhatia recommends folks try Promiseb Scalp Wash.

“The No. 1 error in dandruff treatment is that people forget that the disease starts in the scalp, not in the hair,” Bhatia says. “Many treatments fail because people do not leave over-the-counter or prescription meds on the skin long enough for the scalp to absorb the medication.”

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