For Sistas Only: Dermatologists Dispense Science-Backed Hair-Health Advice

March 22, 2012

If you've ever been skeptical about unsourced hair-health advice from naturalista "experts," a new report presented at the American Academy of Dermatology's annual meeting provides science-based hair-care advice for African-American women. The report, presented by Raechele Cochran Gathers, MD, also reveals that dermatologists are often the first line of defense for sistas looking for solutions to their hair problems.

First, some facts: African-American hair is more fragile and damage-prone than other hair types. What's more, more than half of black women who visit dermatologists list hair thinning or balding as a main concern for their visit. What these findings show is simple: Black women's hair-health concerns are very real.

In response, Gathers and researchers at the Multi-Cultural Dermatology Center at the Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit offered these hair-care best practices to help keep African-American tresses healthy:

Washing. Shampoo hair once each week or once every other week to avoid build-up of hair-care products. After every wash, moisturize hair with conditioners and pay extra attention to the tips of your strands—the part of hair that's most prone to damage. For gym babies, it's important to rinse hair after a workout to remove sweat and salt build-up. Add some conditioner after rinsing to provide tresses with additional moisture.

Products. According to Gathers, to help hair maintain moisture, use those that contain natural ingredients, such as olive oil, shea butter or aloe vera gel or juice. And avoid sulfate-containing shampoos that can dry hair out.

For conditioners, use those with wheat proteins, amino acids, or hydrolyzed proteins to benefit your mane's health. In addition, indulge in hot oil treatments twice each month to infuse hair with extra moisture and elasticity.

Styling with relaxers. When dealing with relaxers, let a professional hairstylist apply them to minimize damage to your strands (that goes for touchups too, which shouldn't be done more

frequently than every 8 to 12 weeks). Don’t apply relaxers to already relaxed hair; this can lead to serious hair damage.

Heat styling. If you’re heat styling your hair, after washing and before tresses are heat styled, always use heat protectants on strands. This helps decrease hair damage. Also, ceramic combs or irons do less damage to hair while straightening, and so does closely monitoring the temperature setting on hair-styling appliances. If possible, use one with a digital monitor, to make sure it’s not too hot. Better still, don’t heat style hair more than once each week.

Change up styles. Evidence shows high-tension hairstyles, such as braids, cornrows or weaves, can cause hair thinning and baldness if they’re too tight or are left in for too long. Think about it this way: If a hair style causes pain; don’t use it, or modify it so it doesn’t cause damage. One type of hair loss is associated with high-tension hairstyles. It’s called central centrifugal cicatricial alopecia (CCCA) and is the single most common permanent form of hair loss seen among African-American women. To get to the root of the problem, always consult a dermatologist or physician if you notice hair thinning, bald patches or any other hair-health maladies.

Remember, underlying medical problems can also cause hair thinning and other hair troubles, so it’s always best to get it checked out by an expert.

Click here to learn about the 5 top medical reasons for thinning hair.

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