Breaking Points

African-American hair is notoriously fragile and easily damaged, but everyday solutions can help black women overcome these hurdles.

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If breakage is arresting your hair's development, don't despair. The first thing to do is understand why your hair is breaking. Once you identify the culprit, you can unlock the key to attaining long, healthy locks.

Some questions to ask, advises Veronique Morrison, director of education for the Mizani hair care brand, include the following: "Is my hair lacking protein?" and "Is my hair so dry from a lack of moisture that it's shedding and falling?" If you don't know how to tell one problem from the other, then try visiting a hair stylist for guidance, Morrison advises. But she also notes that breakage can be caused by scalp problems. If you suspect that might be your issue, it's probably best to consult a dermatologist.

But many everyday culprits may also be responsible for your mane's breakage. Here's how to address a few of the most common causes of this problem:

Use the right products. Why? Well, because using the wrong ones can harm your hair's health. "A lot of breakage and other damage could be avoided if you use the correct products for your hair type and texture," says Coco Sanders, owner of Appearances Hair Design, a Glendale, Arizona, salon.

What's more, curly haired clients should limit the amount of alcohol-containing products they use, Morrison says, because these styling aids tend to rob the hair of moisture both inside and out. Curly hair in particular loses natural moisture, so choose brands with moisturizing formulas.

Trim hair even if it's healthy. Many black women are still afraid to cut their hair. But when you trim hair on a regular basis, you'll keep tresses in "optimal condition," Morrison says. "The ends are obviously the oldest hair on the head and sometimes receive the most aggressive treatment with chemical, thermal and mechanical processes." These services weaken hair and split the strands. This is why trimming your ends approximately every eight weeks—in addition to your regular hair

maintenance—allows strands to stay healthy looking and strong.

Practice safe use of chemical treatments. “Only have a licensed professional apply any chemicals or reconstructive conditioners to your hair,” Sanders says. She believes many women damage their hair by doing chemical treatments themselves or by having someone they know do their hair. “I like to call them ‘kitchen beauticians,’” she says. But such cost-cutting measures often come with big drawbacks.

“When you use over-the-counter chemicals, ensure all warnings are observed and that the application and processing are in line with the manufacturer’s directions,” Morrison advises.

Says Rob Robinson, a cosmetic chemist for BeautyStat.com, “At-home relaxers and hair color products are generally safe when used as directed, but we recommend doing a patch test on a small area of skin to make sure the product does not cause irritation.”

Other tips to prevent breakage:

- “Shampoo hair at least once each week, but not more than twice, with a sulfate-free moisturizing shampoo, and condition with a protein-rich conditioner,” Sanders says. “Have a deep-conditioning treatment as often as your stylist recommends.”
- “Lighten up on heat styling,” Sanders suggests. “Do not use excessive heat on tresses, and use a thermal heat protectant when blow-drying hair. Also, precede flatiron use with a thermal hair protector.”
- Don’t brush the hair while wet. Apply leave-in conditioner and use a large-toothed comb to detangle hair and to equally distribute conditioner.
- Avoid pulling hair too tight. This means avoid or limit cotton-backed, coiled ponytail holders that rob hair of moisture at the point of contact, Morrison warns.
- Finally, Sanders says, “Eat a balanced diet full of healthy vegetables and proteins.” Why? “Because nutrients feed follicles.”

Power Up!
Want stronger, shinier, less frizzy hair? Then try a protein-packed treatment.

Protein treatments (a.k.a. keratin treatments) are a popular process for strengthening damaged hair. “Keratin treatments work by smoothing and conditioning the hair cuticle, which makes hair stronger, shinier and less frizzy,” says Ron Robinson, cosmetic chemist for BeautyStat.com.

Everyone’s hair is made of keratin, a type of protein, explains Veronique Morrison, director of education for the Mizani brand. But everyone’s hair type and history are not the same. Therefore, they have unique keratin needs.

What’s more, chemicals found in hair treatments may break protein bonds, so treated hair, along with damaged and naturally dry hair, may need more protein than other hair types. Still, too much protein can also cause breakage.

To avoid protein treatment problems, find a reputable salon with licensed and trained technicians, Robinson says. “Ask stylists pointed questions about the number of treatments they’ve performed, the brand of keratin they use, and the results they’ve seen. If the stylist can’t answer these questions, or is unsure, find another salon.”

How often should protein treatments be done? “Once each month is enough,” says Rochelle Mosley, author of How to Do Your Hair at Home. And, because protein treatments can dry your locks, you should follow up with a moisture treatment every week, she adds.

“If consumers use an at-home treatment, they should follow manufacturer’s directions carefully,” Robinson says. But, he cautions, let a hair care professional perform the more intense treatments.

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