Lengthy Proceedings

If you've gone natural to grow your tresses long and strong only to watch your curls and coils shrink when wet, don't tear out your hair in frustration. Instead, read this first.

December 6, 2012 By Gerrie E. Summers

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When wet, natural coily or kinky hair dries, it shrinks. A lot. As much as 75 percent, says natural hair expert and celebrity stylist Diane Bailey. In fact, this incredible disappearing act is the biggest hurdle faced by black women with these hair textures. But that's not the long and short of it. "Shrinkage is inherent," she says, "but it can be managed."

Another hair care professional, Shelley Davis, owner of Kinky-Curly, a natural hair salon, offers a more philosophical and functional viewpoint. "I believe that shrinkage is part of having naturally curly hair," Davis says, "and more women should learn to embrace it rather than fight it."

Although the amount of shrinkage varies from person to person, there are a variety of successful and popular techniques that can help women achieve maximum hang time for their curls and coils. Whatever your opinions, the tips that follow will help make it easier for you to embrace, as well as elongate, your natural hair.

Styling Tips

- When applying styling product, comb your mousse, gel or lotion through the hair with a wide-tooth comb. "The results are looser, more stretched-out curls," Davis says. "If you brush product through with a Denman or a natural bristle brush, you will get springier, bouncier curls."
- When possible, don't shampoo hair that's loose. If you shampoo tresses while in a few twists or braids, the hair will retain some of its length.
- Use products that help weigh the hair down. For example, certain conditioners help stretch hair's curl pattern. Some women add aloe vera gel to their products, or use styling aids such as Kinky Curly Custard or SheaMoisture Curl Enhancing Smoothie.
- "The best way to combat shrinkage is to work with the hair dry," says stylist Felicia

Leatherwood. "After you've shampooed and conditioned your hair, plait the hair up and wait for the next day to do your twist-out styles. That way the hair will give you more length than when it was wet." (Some women with natural hair report that they?ve experienced up to 85 percent shrinkage when their hair is wet.)

Blow-drying

- "I am not a fan of blasting roots or the length of hair with a blow-dryer to fight shrinkage," Davis says. "Heat from a blow-dryer at such a close distance is extremely drying and damaging."
- If you blow-dry to prevent shrinkage, says Ursula Stephens, a celebrity hairstylist who is also a global ambassador for hair-care line Motions, "you should always attach a diffuser to the end of your blow-dryer." Skipping that step, she adds, "can cause damage as the heat is not controlled or modified and can be too harsh on the hair."
- "The other way to get more length is to use a blow-dryer with a comb attachment," Leatherwood says. "Be sure to use a leave-in or heat protectant first before blowing out your hair. The hair can be blown out up to twice a month [and still remain] healthy." In addition, Leatherwood says, "Avoid too much heat and never sleep on wet hair. Wet hair will tangle during the night."

Roller Sets

- After washing, stretch out the hair by placing sections on rollers and then allowing tresses to air-dry.

Tresses Trivia
See how much you know about hair.

1. Why is a "V" shape in the middle of the hairline called the "widow's peak"?
a) Because women with this hairline were thought of as black widow spiders whose mates met an untimely demise.
b) Because only women are born with this hairline shape.
c) Because this hairline is similar to that of a headdress worn by women in mourning.

2. What custom in India results in trimmed locks that are later used to make weaves sold in the United States?
a) An ancient yoga ritual
b) A religious ceremony for married women
c) A purification ritual

3. The shape and contour of hair have a natural default setting, but water and heat are able to reshape them.
a) True
b) False

Answers
1. Answer: a and c. The term "widow’s peak" originated in the 1800s when some people believed this type of hairline showed a woman would outlive her husband. Also, the shape is similar to a headdress worn by women in mourning.
2. Answer: c. Members of a Hindu sect in India shave their hair twice in their lives. Entrepreneurs gather the hair to sell to U.S. hair manufacturers.
3. Answer: True. Water and heat can break the weak chemical bonds that hold hair together.

(Source: Hair: The Long and the Short of It, by Art Neufeld.)

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