The Long & Short of It

The remarkable ability of our natural curls, coils and kinks to stretch to great lengths

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For many African-American women with super curly hair, the issue of humidity is huge. Moisture means shrinkage of epic proportions. In fact, it can dwindle our hair to less than 20 percent of its actual length.

Black hair is unique in that it's so elastic and able to shrink and stretch to considerable lengths. This is because when natural curls, kinks and coils absorb moisture, tresses draw up (contract), causing hair to look amazingly shorter.

Interestingly, African-American hair that appears abbreviated can stretch by more than 50 percent when elongated by gently pulling strands taut or straightening strands out to their full length with the help of heat appliances, such as a flat iron. Many women who are trying to grow out their hair conduct this length check on a regular basis to measure how many inches they've achieved.

But how does humidity (the amount of moisture in the air) make human hair curl? The answer is based on chemistry. When the air is humid, the hydrogen particles in H2O form bonds between the proteins and water molecules in the hair, contracting the strands.

For those with straight hair, humidity usually results in wavier strands. But for individuals with super curly tresses, the extra water absorbed prompts strands to curl even more as the cuticles—the smooth outermost layer of the hair—swells, raises and frizzes up.

In the summer, when humidity levels are higher, frizz and shrinkage become factors for many people with curly tresses, such as Janice, a freelance writer in Newark.

"When my hair shrinks," she says, "it gets really frizzy and tangles easily, so if you're in a hurry, good luck because your hair becomes almost impossible to style."

But to some people, the ability of black hair to be simultaneously short and long is an amazing thing. "I really love that one day my hair can look like the ends just brush the back of my neck, and then the next day, after I've stretched out my tresses with a blow dryer or flat-ironed it, my hair is long enough to make it down to my bra strap," says Karen, a 34-year-old New York City naturalista who has been growing out her previously relaxed hair for almost two years. "That's so cool. I love that kind of versatility!"

Unfortunately, or fortunately—depending on your outlook on any given day—there really isn't anything you can do to stop your hair from shrinking, except, maybe, cut it off. (Yikes! Let's not get drastic, right?) That's because this tendency of certain types of African-American hair to contract is—much like bad weather—beyond our control.

That said, however, there are steps you can take to address shrinkage and work with your hair when it doesn't seem to want to cooperate.

For those tips, check out the suggestions in the sidebar (right).

Remember, you are not your hair. But love your tresses no matter what, and happy curls to you!

Stretch It Out

A few nifty ways to elongate natural hair

When your hair gets wet and shrinks up, try these tips to lengthen those locks.

Make twists. Part freshly washed hair into several quarters, and apply your favorite leave-in moisturizers. Then make smaller partings in each section and simply twist together two pieces of hair into two-strand twists. (Hint: Slather on generous amounts of product to weigh down your hair and allow gravity to extend it.)

Use hair bands. Divide wet or dampened hair. Then, wind ponytail holders around sections of tresses from root to tip. This will allow your strands to stretch. (Hint: Don't overuse this method because of the potential for breakage.)

Blow-dry your roots. Apply heat protectant to sections of damp hair. Use a round brush to gently roll hair taut at the roots, and place the nozzle of a blow dryer directly above the section you want to target. The heat will straighten your roots and lengthen your locks. (Hint: Set your dryer to moderate heat, and don't linger so long that you damage your hair.)

Try quick hair-stretching styles. These include creating bantu knots, high buns and traditional three-strand braids. You can even set freshly washed hair on rollers, flexi rods or straws or use hair-stretching tools, such as rubber plates. Leave in the style for several hours or overnight, and let dry. Undo the style, comb out your hair and presto! Longer locks achieved. (Hint: If you use extender appliances, try using them with a hair steamer or a hooded dryer.)

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