On the Right Track

If properly used, hair extensions can add versatility to your styling options, but take care not to let these faux pieces damage your tresses and scalp.

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According to historical accounts, the use of hairpieces is a 1,000-year-old tradition that includes wigs and weaves worn to beautify or as a mark of status by people in many different societies. Today, hair extensions have grown into a global industry that's fueled by "celebrity culture and a wave of new technology for applying the extensions," according to a marketing report on the economic trends in this business.

Now, faux tresses made of synthetic or human hair can be clipped, clamped, glued, sealed, sewn, or taped on or braided into an individual's mane. Each method has its pros and cons, devotees and detractors, and also a downside: possible breakage and baldness or worse when the extensions aren't properly applied and cared for.

A few years ago, some hair health experts in England wanted glue-in extensions banned because the bonding material can rip strands from the scalp at the roots and cause traction alopecia. But any kind of add-on tresses may trigger this type of hair loss when they're attached to your mane improperly, mishandled or poorly maintained, experts warn.

Trish Leigh in California had extensions attached to her hair with the hot-fusion method. This technique uses a heating element to melt the bonds on keratin-tipped extensions to merge them with the real strands of a client's hair. "They seemed wonderful at first," says Leigh in a YouTube video.

After carefully examining her hair, Leigh found that the stylist, who freelanced and worked on clients in her home, had botched the job. Instead of spacing out the extensions, she had bundled and stacked them in groupings on Leigh's head. Two to three days later, her scalp began to itch and the hair became tangled. Leigh tracked down the stylist and asked her to remove the added-in locks. When the stylist told her the hair was permanent, Leigh freaked out.

"Every [extension] was tangled with another one, and I couldn't sleep," Leigh says. She wound up having to keep the extensions in for two and a half weeks until she could find someone to take them out. Pieces of her hair in the back had to be cut to remove the extensions, and her tresses were matted from the extensions having been left in for so long. "It was a horrible experience," she says.

To avoid the nightmare Leigh experienced, dermatologists suggest that women go to a reputable salon where licensed professionals specialize in extensions and weaves.

In addition, they stress that add-on hair should not be installed too tight or positioned so that the extensions pull on a woman's real hair or scalp.

The American Academy of Dermatology also advises that women should wear hair extensions for only two or three months at most, observe good scalp hygiene and remove the pieces to switch to other hairstyles.

Leigh says she now knows not to trust just anybody to apply extensions. She's also not likely to request the ones with keratin bonds. "I'll use clip-ins, like I do now," she says. "But I still have damage in the back of my hair."

Although Leigh is not a professional hairstylist, based on her experience, she offers advice to people who may be considering getting extensions. She cautions individuals to conduct massive amounts of research and to find a technician they trust to do the work because "sometimes people are just out there to make a buck."

But not all women suffer such hairstyling disasters. Many people report that they've never had a negative experience with extensions. For these women, the key to no regrets and achieving the goal of healthy hair is to take good care of their crowning glory. On this, most experts wholeheartedly agree.

Best Practices

Read this before you rush to get hair extensions.

Choose quality over price.

If you're tempted to buy cheap hair extensions, resist the urge. Inexpensive can equal inferior when it comes to faux locks, and there's usually a price to pay in the end. Budget products may be shabbily made of low-priced artificial materials that cause scalp irritation and allergic reactions. This is why it's better to stick with human hair extensions of the highest standard that you can use and reuse without issues.

Find a skillful, trustworthy professional to do your hair.

Conduct research to locate experienced professionals for extension installations. Respectfully ask technicians to provide one or two previous clients you can contact to hear how they feel about their work. (If they balk, take your business elsewhere.)

Discuss any concerns you have.

Your hair is precious stuff, so address any worries you may have with your technician, including too-tight installations that can put tension on your scalp. And this is super important: Before you

have extensions applied, ask your stylist to walk you through a maintenance schedule for both your new locks and natural hair.

Finally, don’t shirk your responsibilities for the upkeep and care of both your added hair and real tresses. After all, good advice only works if you follow it.

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