Want to Say Bye-Bye to Shampoo?

More women are learning that washing their hair with conditioner can help keep tresses from getting parched.

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What's in traditional shampoos that harms black hair? The list of ingredients is long and filled with drying chemical compounds.

If you read the label of pretty much any bottle of shampoo, you'll find many cleansing compounds that can also strip away sebum, the oil our hair follicles secrete. Because black hair is so prone to dryness, these ingredients can cause brittle, damaged strands that break off when we handle our manes.

Try this test. Wash your hair with a bottle of almost any shampoo you might find in a store and you'll feel the stripping effects of the ingredients on your beautiful black hair. If you run your hands lightly over your hair, you might find that you're unable to slide your fingers effortlessly along the length of your curls. This is because these chemical compounds launch a major assault on your coils and kinks. Your hair is a casualty of war, and shampoo is the enemy.

But today, many African-American women know that the harsh ingredients in shampoo aren't necessary to cleanse the hair. Washing your hair with conditioner, or co-washing (short for "conditioner-only washing"), is an effective way to cleanse your curls without stripping your strands.

Common ingredients in conditioners include fatty alcohols, such as cetyl, lauryl, stearyl and cetearyl; silicones, such as panthenol, glycerin, dimethicone, dimethiconol, amodimethicone and cyclomethicone; propylene glycol; cetrimonium chloride for slip; and various oils that penetrate hair cuticles to give strands elasticity.

Of course, this list is incomplete. The ingredients found in conditioners include many chemical compounds and natural botanicals that are used in different brands. What's more, these hair smoothers fall into many categories, such as moisturizing, acidifying, cleansing, detangling, leave-in, thermal and color-protecting.

But all conditioners moisturize the hair instead of drying it out. As a result, strands are more manageable, supple and hydrated and much less prone to breakage.

“When I first tried washing my hair with conditioner, I was very skeptical,” says Nora, one woman who converted to co-washing just one year ago. “I thought that there was no way a conditioner could clean my hair. When I stepped out of the shower, I was surprised to find that my hair felt really good. My curls were clean and soft. There was none of that stripped, rough feeling to my strands that I’d get after using a shampoo. That’s when it all made sense to me.

“Now, I co-wash my hair most of the time and just use shampoo every so often when I feel heavy accumulations of product buildup on my hair,” she adds.

One cosmetologist at Urban Tangles in Atlanta shares on YouTube that although co-washing does leave hair soft and manageable, when conditioner is consistently used as a cleanser, sometimes strands are so heavily coated with product that tresses, whether natural or relaxed, can become difficult to style. “You have to get that buildup off,” she says. Her suggestion? Use a neutralizing shampoo to clean layers of product from the hair.

But hair care companies offer another solution. They created cleansing conditioners that contain a mix of ingredients that both clean and condition the hair. For some, this works well. Still, others opt to embrace a more personalized approach to hair cleansing and conditioning.

Just try different things to see what works for you, suggests AuCurls Naturelle, on her YouTube video channel. “You can find that balance because you are unique,” she says. “Your hair is unique.”

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