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How often to wash hair? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

The last time I was at the hair cutting salon, the person who washed my hair asked me if I washed my hair everyday. I said I did, and she said she could tell. I'm not sure what she meant by this, but please tell me how she could determine this, and what is the best overall practice for washing hair in terms of frequency. I'm interested in the health of my hair as well as the health of my scalp.

Thanks for you help!

Answer

Dear Reader,

Although you'd need to confirm this with your stylist, it's possible she thought that your hair lacked some of its natural oils, which could have been stripped from over-washing. Most shampoos on the market contain water, foaming agents, fragrances, and various amounts of detergents. Shampoos that are designed for oily hair have more detergent than shampoos for non-oily hair. Detergents, while useful for washing away dirt, dead skin, and oil (known as sebum), can make hair less manageable and cause it to become dry, brittle, and lose body. Proper hair and scalp care involves washing your hair regularly to remove the typical buildup of dirt, dead skin cells, sebum, and any other substances you put in your hair. How you define "regularly" is up to you.

People with different hair textures may have differing hair care needs. For example, people with hair that is tightly coiled or coarse may find that shampooing once a week is plenty. This is because oils produced by the scalp can't easily migrate from the hair follicle down the curly or coiled strand of hair, so oil build up happens slowly. On the other hand, folks with straight, fine hair may notice oil build up sooner and may wash a few times a week or even every day. If you're flummoxed by how often to wash, you may want to speak with a stylist, friend, or family member who is familiar with your hair type.

Beyond hair type and personal preferences, there may be some additional considerations to ponder when it comes to a healthier hair care routine:

- The most commonly found ingredients for removing sebum from hair are known as anionic detergents. Watch out for ingredients such as lauryl sulfates, laureth sulfates, and sulfosuccinates in your shampoo. These are effective for controlling oil but can be harsh on the hair with frequent use. If you're not concerned about excess oil production, you might consider avoiding shampoos with these ingredients.
- Amphoteric detergents are a less powerful class of sebum-removers that are gentler on the hair. Look for cocamidopropyl betaine or sodium lauraminopropionate — ingredients often found in baby shampoos.
- While evidence is limited, products containing coconut oil or argan oil may be beneficial for hair health, with some reporting that it helps keep hair moisturized.
- Nutrition also plays a critical role in hair health; eating a well-balanced diet complete with fatty acids, zinc, and protein can contribute to strength and growth of the hair.

In addition to examining your shampooing practices, you may want to think about if you're using conditioner. Conditioner can help to improve the appearance of hair by making it easier to comb and manage, which can make the hair less likely to break. Additionally, they're used to help smooth seal the hair's cuticle, thereby preventing further damage. If you're not already, using conditioner when washing your hair may help reduce any damage that your hair experiences over time.

You can always try experimenting with different hair washing frequencies and different shampoos to see what works best. Next time you go for a cut, you could ask for hair product recommendations or guidance on how often to wash your hair based on its condition and composition. Whether you find yourself in a health care provider's office or hair salon, if a specialist says something unclear, you can always ask for more info! It's their job to provide a service as well as educate you about what they're doing.

Here's to you and your luscious locks!

Alice!

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