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Hair condition: Oily or dry? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

How do I know if my hair is oily or dry? Does it make a difference if I'm a guy with short hair?

— clueless

Answer

Dear clueless,

Determining one's hair type can be confusing, especially in light of the ever-increasing number of options available in the shampoo aisle. Individuals with dry hair may seek more moisture-heavy or "repairing" hair care products, while those with oily hair might look for a shampoo labeled with terms like "clarifying" or "deep cleaning." In many cases, hair type is directly related to scalp condition, as well as other factors such as genetics, personal hygiene, hormones, and nutrition; however, gender and hair length do not influence hair type.

Your hair condition hangs in the balance, literally. There is a mechanism in the human body called a "negative feedback" that detects changes in internal body conditions, followed by physiological responses designed to return it back to balance, or *homeostasis*. Oily hair is a good example of this negative feedback process: the body may overproduce oil (also referred to as *sebum*, a combination of fatty acids and dead skin cells) as a way to compensate for dry scalp.

Oily scalp is also caused by hormone imbalances, many of which emerge as a result of adolescence, pregnancy, consumption of hormone-related medicines including birth control and steroids, as well as various adrenal or pituitary conditions. Research shows that oily scalp may also be a consequence of vitamin B-2, fatty acid, and riboflavin nutritional deficiencies ^[2]. Some speculate that heredity is the single most important predictor of oily scalp, but this has yet to be proven scientifically.

Oily hair and scalp may cause dandruff, lead to a dirty appearance or unpleasant smell, and result in scalp, forehead, or neck acne, especially among individuals with straight or thin hair. If your scalp feels oily, try washing your hair with a mild, oil-free shampoo (baby shampoo works fine) and conditioner specially formulated for oily hair. Moisturizer for oily hair? Yes, remember

that negative feedback loop: treating oily scalp or hair with more oil will signal the body that too much oil is present, thus reducing sebum production.

During humid seasons, those with oily hair may find it helpful to wash or rinse the hair twice daily. In addition, people with oily scalps should aim to use few or no styling products, including serums, creams, mousses, gels, and sprays. Various do-it-yourself cleansing rinses may also be helpful to restore balance — try mixing one cup of water with a cup of apple cider vinegar, massaging the mixture into the scalp, and then rinsing thoroughly with water.

Dry hair usually results from overuse of coloring agents, perming, overexposure to wind or sun, and heat styling. Fragile hair follicles that break easily or split (split ends) are commonly associated with dry hair, and are exacerbated by excessive washing, chemical treatments, and alcohol-based styling products. People with dry hair may benefit from moisturizing shampoos, conditioners, and hair oils (coconut and jojoba oils work well), washing the hair less frequently, using heat styling tools less often, and using alcohol-free styling products. If none of these options work, consider contacting your health care provider to determine whether a medical condition is causing your dry hair.

Alice!

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Published date:

Apr 12, 1996

Last reviewed on:

Apr 03, 2014

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