

## Chlorine effects on hair <sup>[1]</sup>

Alice,

I have begun swimming four to six times a week, and am concerned about the effects that chlorine will have on my hair. I have been washing it after each swim with "Ultra Swim," which claims to render the chlorine molecules harmless. I sometimes also use the conditioner by the same brand, but either way, my hair feels "coated" afterward. A friend said I should wear a swimming cap, but my head is too big for the caps I've been able to find in local stores. How concerned should I be about this? Do you have any suggestions?

— G.L.

### Answer

Dear G.L.,

It seems ironic that wetting your hair in the swimming pool could leave it so dry, but the structure of your hair is vulnerable to drying agents, like the chlorine in swimming pools. The cortex, or inner layer, of hair is protected by the cuticle, or outer layer. Sebum is a natural lubricant that protects the cuticle. The chlorine in pools sucks the sebum out of your hair, which may cause the cuticle to crack. This damage causes your hair's natural sheen to diminish, and the unprotected cortex to potentially "split," creating split ends.

Swimmers who want to protect their shiny locks may take the following precautions:

- Go light on hair coloring, perms, waves, hot curlers/combs, and blow dryers.
- Wear a rubber bathing cap. Although it doesn't keep all of the water out, it helps. Sports stores or online stores that sell swimmers' equipment would have caps in a wide range of sizes.
- Before putting the bathing cap on, put conditioner in your hair.
- After swimming, rinse hair with tap water, preferably using shampoo.
- To dry hair, don't rub. Pat or squeeze gently and/or wrap in a towel. Blow dry your hair on medium or cool settings.
- Use a wide-tooth comb, not a brush, to detangle wet hair.

The "coated" feeling that you're experiencing in your hair from the swimmers' shampoo and conditioner is probably exactly that — a protective coating from the hazards of chlorine. Try using the swimmers' conditioner under the bathing cap while swimming, and then shampoo and condition it out afterwards with a brand that doesn't coat your hair. Alternating shampoos you use may help combat the buildup of shampoo residue on the hair shaft, which may cause your hair to be dull and lifeless. For dry hair, a protein shampoo labeled with substantive protein is recommended. The shampoo would be more than slightly acidic. Another option is to rinse your hair following shampoo with white vinegar and water or lemon and water. This acid rinse will help restore the natural shine to your hair. For more general hair tips, see [How often to wash hair?](#) [2].

Swimming's an excellent way to stay physically active, but it may provide quite the workout for your hair! Taking the necessary steps to protect your tresses will allow you to dive back in worry-free!

Alice!

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Published date:

Dec 04, 1995

Last reviewed on:

Apr 02, 2014

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