

Healthy hair

Healthy hair is a natural adjunct to a really healthy person. If you want to keep your hair healthy, you have to avoid the enemies of healthy hair: too much sun, vitamin deficiencies, illness or other stressors, certain drugs like sulfa drugs and birth control pills, and cosmetic assaults such as perming or dyeing. There also is the issue of environmental contamination, as from chlorine.

Damage from the sun can be avoided by following the example of people in other cultures where there is harsh sun—they cover their heads to protect the hair and the hair follicles from ultraviolet damage. Products are readily available that protect the hair from solar damage, essentially “sunscreens” for the hair. Remember, not only can sun damage the hair, but also the heat from hair dryers is unquestionably associated with hair damage and hair loss.

Chlorine, used in swimming pools, is a bleach and it does have a damaging effect on hair. Not only does it affect the texture and color of the hair, but it also can weaken hair at the follicle. Sports magazines for swimmers usually have advertisements for products that are designed to protect the hair from chlorine damage.

If you have pets, it's easy to see how hair is affected by diet. Try feeding your dog or cat one of the nutritionally rich pet foods and watch how the animal soon develops a completely different coat: dryness disappears and the coat becomes thick and lustrous. The same thing happens in humans when sufficient nutrients are added to the diet.

Conversely, poor diet and especially crash dieting have the opposite effect on the hair, and hair loss may occur. The nutrients that are sometimes implicated in hair loss are the essential fatty acids, so I give flaxseed oil or the amino acid L-cysteine.

Dosages: Flaxseed oil, four to six 1,000-milligram capsules or up to one tablespoon daily. L-cysteine, 500 milligrams three times daily, not with food.

What's so insidious about hair loss is that it can be latent. You go on a crash diet, then resume your normal eating habits and later lose hair, so it's hard to establish antecedents. It's hard to recognize that the crash dieting or the illness (or whatever it was) was causing the hair loss.

Many people don't recognize the relationship of hair condition or hair loss to illness. Sometimes there is a latency period of months after an illness before the hair loss occurs. Hair is, in fact, one of the most vulnerable parts of the body. After chemotherapy, the hair loss occurs about ten days later; what this really represents is free-radical damage and a profound interruption of nutrition to the rapidly growing hair follicle. Any nutritional deficiency or illness is liable to show up in the skin and nails and also the hair.

I'm not saying that all hair loss is a sign of disease or poor health; there is a programmatic loss of hair that occurs hormonally, particularly in men but also in women. As they age, most women also will experience some hair loss. It happens to some women in their 40s as a prelude to menopause.

Whether you're a man or a woman, if you find that you're losing more hair than you suspect is normal, you should certainly see your doctor to investigate the cause. For instance, I often tell women who have had hair loss to try discontinuing birth

control pills or hormone replacement therapy. While estrogen may rejuvenate hair and skin in some women—and logically speaking it should, because the hormones involved have an anti-aging effect—for others there is a paradoxical side effect. Loss of scalp hair is listed as a side effect of estrogen in the *Physicians' Desk Reference*, though it is infrequent. Hypothyroidism can cause dry skin and thinning hair; thyroid medication can reverse this. Any kind of autoimmune disease, such as lupus, can cause hair loss.

Generally, a safe, conservative approach to hair care is the best way to keep hair healthy. Harsh treatments such as dyeing, straightening and perming should be avoided. I see African American women with serious hair thinning problems who have been using hair relaxing products for 30 years or more. They say, "If this is from the hair relaxing products, why didn't I get it 30 years ago?" It's like anything else: A continued assault will produce more damage than an occasional insult and there may be a cumulative effect on the hair and scalp.

Serious health concerns are now being raised about hair dyes, which have a high potential for causing skin irritations, allergies and immune problems because they're in a category of chemicals that have been associated with carcinogenesis: the aromatic compounds or phenolated hydrocarbons with aromatic chains. Studies have shown that people who use them have a higher incidence of certain autoimmune diseases, and there is some evidence, still incomplete, linking them to certain cancers.

Finally, I should say that I don't believe in the "fertilizer theory" of hair growth. Many people start taking supplement after supplement in vain when they are basically dealing with a natural, genetically based hair-thinning or balding process. It's true that some hair loss or thinning is related to debilitating diseases, medication, hormonal changes or problems, or specific individual nutritional deficiencies. It can derive from any one in a series of weak links or from broad-based deficiencies such as those caused by overzealous dieting or anorexia nervosa. The bottom line is to look at your general health picture and make sure you're getting sufficient nutrients across the board.