

# A Primer to Natural Hair Care Practices in Black Patients

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## Practice Points

- Many scalp and hair diseases in patients of African and Afro-Caribbean descent result from traumatic hairstyling practices and poor management. Proper care of these patients requires an understanding of hair variances and styling techniques across ethnicities.
- The use of protective hairstyles and adequate trimming can aid black patients in the transition to healthier natural hair.
- The use of natural oils for scalp health and the avoidance of products containing chemicals that remove moisture from the hair are helpful in maintaining healthy natural hair.

*Natural hairstyles have increased in popularity in the United States among individuals of African and Afro-Caribbean descent. Dermatologists should be aware of general principles of natural hair care in this patient population, including basic hair care terminology, types of natural hairstyles, methods of washing, and product selection. A basic knowledge of natural hair care practices in black patients will assist dermatologists in the management and treatment of many conditions associated with traumatic hairstyling in this patient population.*

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The phenomenon of natural (nonchemically treated) hair in individuals of African and Afro-Caribbean descent is sweeping across the United States. The ideals of beauty among this

patient population have shifted from a relaxed, straightened, noncurly look to a more natural curly and/or kinky appearance. The discussion on natural hair versus straight hair has been brought to the mainstream by films such as *Good Hair* (2009). Furthermore, major hair care companies have increased their marketing of natural hair products to address the needs of these patients.

Popular traumatic hair care practices such as chemical relaxation and thermal straightening may lead to hair damage. Although the role of hair care practices in various scalp and hair disorders is ambiguous, traumatic practices commonly are performed by patients who are diagnosed with dermatologic conditions such as scarring alopecia.<sup>1</sup> Alopecia is the fourth most common dermatologic diagnosis in black patients.<sup>2</sup> Central centrifugal cicatricial alopecia is the most common form of scarring alopecia in this patient population<sup>3</sup> and has been associated with traumatic hair care practices. As a result, many patients have switched to natural hairstyles that are less traumatic and damaging, often due to recommendations by dermatologists.

As the US population continues to become more diverse, dermatologists will be faced with many questions regarding hair disease and natural

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hair care in patients with skin of color. A basic understanding of hair care practices among black individuals is important to aid in the diagnosis and treatment of hair shaft and scalp disorders.<sup>4</sup> When patients switch to natural hairstyles, are dermatologists prepared to answer questions that may arise during this process? This article will familiarize dermatologists with basic hair care terminology and general recommendations they can make to black patients who are transitioning to natural hairstyles.

### Characteristics of Hair in the Skin of Color Population

A basic understanding of the structural properties of hair is fundamental. Human hair is categorized into 3 groups: Asian, Caucasian, and African.<sup>5</sup> African hair typically is curly and, depending on the degree of the curl, is more susceptible to damage due to increased mechanical fragility. It also has a tendency to form knots and fissures along the hair shaft, which causes additional fracturing with simple manipulation. African hair grows more slowly than Asian and Caucasian hair, which can be discouraging to patients. It also has a lower water concentration and does not become coated with sebum as naturally as straightened hair.<sup>5</sup> A simplified explanation of these characteristics can help patients understand how to proceed in managing and styling their natural hair.

As physicians, it is important for us to treat any underlying conditions related to the hair and scalp in black patients. Common dermatologic conditions such as seborrheic dermatitis, lupus, folliculitis, and alopecia can affect patients' hair health. In addition to traumatic hair care practices, inflammation secondary to bacterial infections can contribute to the onset of central centrifugal cicatricial alopecia.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, a detailed history and physical examination are needed to evaluate the etiology of associated symptoms. Treatment of these associated symptoms will aid in the overall care of patients.

### Transitioning to Natural Hairstyles

Following evaluation and treatment of any hair or scalp conditions, how can dermatologists help black patients transition to natural hairstyles? The term *transition* refers to the process of switching from a chemically relaxed or thermally straightened hairstyle to a natural hairstyle. Dermatologists must understand the common terminology used to describe natural hair practices in this patient population.

There are several methods patients can use to transition from chemically treated hairstyles to

natural hairstyles. Patients may consider the option of the "big chop," or cutting off all chemically treated hair. This option typically leaves women with very short hairstyles down to the new growth, or hair that has grown since the last chemical relaxer. Other commonly used methods during the transition phase include protective styling (eg, braids, weaves, extensions) or simply growing out the chemically treated hair.

Protective styling methods such as braids, weaves, and extensions allow hair to be easily styled while the chemically treated hair grows out over time.<sup>7</sup> Typically, protective styles may be worn for weeks to months, allowing hair growth without hair breakage and shedding. Hair weaving is a practice that incorporates artificial (synthetic) or human hair into one's natural scalp hair.<sup>8</sup> There are various techniques to extend hair including clip-in extensions, hair bonding and fusion with adhesives, sewing hair into braided hair, or the application of single strands of hair into a cap made of nylon mesh known as a lace front. Braided styles, weaves, and hair extensions cannot be washed as often as natural hair, but it is important to remind patients to replenish moisture as often as possible. Moisturizing or greasing the exposed scalp and proximal hair shafts can assist with water retention. It is imperative to inform patients that overuse of tight braids and glues for weaves and extensions may further damage the hair and scalp. Some of the natural ingredients commonly used in moisturizers include olive oil, jojoba oil, coconut oil, castor oil, and glycerin. These products can commonly cause pomade acne, which should be recognized and treated by dermatologists. Furthermore, long weaves and extensions can put excess weight on natural hair causing breakage. To prevent breakage, wearing an updo (a hairstyle in which the hair is pulled upward) can reduce the heavy strain on the hair.

Dermatologists should remind patients who wish to grow out chemically treated hair to frequently moisturize the hair and scalp as well as to avoid trauma to prevent hair breakage. As the natural hair grows out, the patient will experience varying hair textures from the natural curly hair to the previously processed straightened hair; as a result, the hair may tangle and become damaged. Manual detangling and detangling conditioners can help prevent damage. Patients should be advised to detangle the hair in sections first with the fingers, then with a wide-tooth comb working retrograde from the hair end to the roots.

Frequent hair trimming, ranging from every 4 to 6 weeks to every 2 to 4 months,

should be recommended to patients who are experiencing breakage or wish to prevent damage. Trimming damaged hair can relieve excess weight on the natural hair and remove split ends, which promotes hair growth. Braiding and other lengthening techniques can prevent the hair from curling upon itself or tangling, causing less kinking and thereby decreasing the need for trimming.<sup>7</sup> Wearing bonnets, using satin pillowcases, and wearing protective hairstyles while sleeping also can decrease hair breakage and hair loss. A commonly used hairstyle to protect the hair while sleeping is called “pineappling,” which is used to preserve and protect curls. This technique is described as gathering the hair in a high but loose ponytail at the top of the head. For patients with straightened hair, wrapping the hair underneath a bonnet or satin scarf while sleeping can prevent damage.

### Managing Natural Hairstyles

An important factor in the management of natural hairstyles is the retention of hair moisture, as there is less water content in African hair compared to other hair types.<sup>5</sup> Overuse of heat and harsh shampoos can strip moisture from the hair. Similar to patients with atopic dermatitis who should restore and maintain the skin barrier to prevent transepidermal water loss, it is important to remind patients with natural hairstyles to avoid using products and styling practices that may further deplete water content in the hair. Moisture is crucial to healthy hair.

A common culprit in shampoos that leads to hair dryness is sodium lauryl sulfate/sodium laureth sulfate, a detergent/surfactant used as a foaming agent. Sodium lauryl sulfate is a potent degreaser that binds dirt and excess product on the hair and scalp. It also dissolves oil in the hair, causing additional dryness and breakage.

Patients with natural hairstyles commonly use sulfate-free shampoos to prevent stripping the hair of its moisture and natural oils. Another method used to prevent hair dryness is co-washing, or washing the hair with a conditioner. Co-washing can effectively cleanse the hair while maintaining moisture. The use of cationic ingredients in conditioners aids in sealing moisture within the hair shaft. Hair consists of the negatively charged protein keratin, which binds to cationic surfactants in conditioners.<sup>9</sup> The hydrophobic ends of the surfactant prevent the substance from being rinsed out and act to restore the hair barrier.

Silicone is another important ingredient in hair care products. In patients with natural hair, there are varying views on the use of products containing

silicone. Silicones are added to products designed to coat the hair, adding shine, retaining moisture, and providing thermal protection. Silicones are used to provide “slip.” Slip is a term that is commonly used among patients with natural hair to describe how slippery a product is and how easily the product will help comb or detangle the hair. There are 2 basic types of silicones: water insoluble and water soluble. Water-insoluble silicones traditionally build up on the hair and require surfactant-containing shampoos to be completely removed. Residue buildup on the hair weighs the hair down and causes damage. In contrast, water-soluble silicones do not build up and typically do not cause damage.

Silicones with the prefixes PEG- or PPG- typically are water soluble and will not build up on the hair. Dimethicone copolyol and lauryl methicone copolyol are other water-soluble silicones. In general, water-soluble silicones provide moisturizing properties without leaving residue. Other silicones such as amodimethicone and cyclomethicone are not water soluble but have properties that prevent buildup.

It is common practice for patients with natural hairstyles to avoid using water-insoluble silicones. As dermatologists, we can recommend silicone-free conditioners or conditioners containing water-soluble silicones to prevent hair dehydration and subsequent breakage. It may be advantageous to have patients try various products to determine which ones work best for their hair.

### More Resources for Patients

Dermatologists have extensive knowledge of the pathophysiology of skin, hair, and nail diseases; however, despite our vast knowledge, we also need to recognize our limits. In addition to increasing your own knowledge of natural hair care practices to help your patients, it is important to recommend that your patients search for additional resources to aid in their transition to natural hairstyles. Natural hairstylists can be great resources for patients to help with hair management. In the current digital age, there also are thousands of blogs and social media forums dedicated to the topic of natural hair care. Advising patients to consult natural hair care resources can be beneficial, but as hair specialists, it also is important for us to dispel any false information that our patients may receive. As physicians, it is essential not only to manage patients who present to our offices with conditions resulting from damaging hair practices but also to help prevent such conditions from

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## Highlighting Skin of Color

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occurring. Although there may not be an overwhelming amount of evidence-based medical research to guide our decisions, we also can learn from the thousands of patients who have articulated their stories and experiences. Through observing and listening to our patients, we can incorporate this new knowledge in the management of our patients.

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