

The Mane Event

Caring for cuticles — the ones on your head ANDREA KENNEY

Ever notice the abundance of products for damaged hair on Canadian shelves? In this country, the culprits are two: our climate and ourselves!

The worst treatments we inflict? “Basically, trying to make your hair do what it wasn’t meant to do naturally is quite damaging to the cuticle, the hair’s outer layer,” says Dr. Beatrice Wang, a dermatologist at the Carey Wang Centre for Dermatology and Dermatologic Surgery in Westmount, Que. She’s referring to chemicals and devices for straightening or repeated perming and bleaching, all of which go against your hair’s genetics.

But hair damage is not all self-inflicted. This country’s extremes of temperature — low humidity in winter followed by a hot summer, when Canadians soak up the sun throughout long, windy days outdoors — can dry out your hair by roughing up and damaging the cuticles, says Wang.

THE INTACT CUTICLE

Nature has coated each of the 100,000 or so hairs on an adult head with a colourless layer of tough protein, the cuticle. This functions to protect the strength-building, fibrous protein filaments within each hair’s inner core.

Under the microscope, each hair’s structure resembles that of a cylindrical roof covered in flat shingles, the cuticle cells. These shingles must lie flat to maintain the look of healthy hair that is soft to the touch, lustrous to the eye and able to reflect light.



THE FRAZZLED CUTICLE

With habitual mistreatment, however, the edges of the cuticles start to lift up irregularly — like weathered scales or roof shingles — around each hair’s diameter up and down the length of the shaft, chipping and wearing away over time. The injured hair shaft can break partway down (contributing to fly-away hairs and the frizzies) or at the tips — hence dry ends, where hair is most obviously desiccated and coarse to the touch. Such is what scientists call porous (dry, dull) and non-elastic (brittle, fragile) hair — in a word, damaged.


DAMAGE CONTROL

But we needn’t let the damage go so far; technology offers assistance. “There’s a lot of research going on — by cosmetic companies actually — in terms of maintaining healthy hair,” explains Wang. “They’ve developed products that really can, to some degree, improve the cohesion of the layering of cuticles so the hair looks good again” — at least until its next shampoo. In turn, technology needs our help. “A lot of people don’t protect their hair the way they protect their skin,” Wang observes.

7-STEP PLAN FOR CONDITIONED CUTICLES

- 1 Shampoo less often** Wetting hair raises cuticle cells, thereby increasing friction between hairs and the potential for damage. Shampooing less also translates into less damage from blow-drying. If you feel your hair is not so fresh, try a dry shampoo or wear your hair in an updo, which stays in place best when hair is not squeaky clean anyway.
- 2 Use a conditioner** “Conditioners flatten the cuticles to give a smooth surface,” explains Wang. “If the cells are less uplifted, they’re less likely to break off.” The goal is to achieve smooth protected hairs moving against other smooth protected hairs on your head.
- 3 Dry and smooth with care** As Anthony Ruso, senior stylist at Soho Salon & Spa in Etobicoke, Ont., advises, “Use products designed to protect your hair cuticles when heat is applied.” In addition, set the dryer on Low or Cool, and use an air-diffuser attachment. Or try using a leave-in conditioner and letting your hair air-dry.
- 4 Combat UV rays** “Spray the scalp and hair with regular sunscreen, mostly to protect the scalp,” says Wang. “To be honest, there are no studies so far to show that sunscreen will help or harm hair in any way. But, intuitively, it might be of some benefit because sunscreen has a moisturizing base as well.” Alternatively? “Wear a hat with a tight weave, use a parasol and/or limit sun time.” Be aware that the sun has a bleaching effect on hair.
- 5 Outsmart salt or chlorinated water** “In the same way it dries skin, salt or pool water will dry and lift the cuticles,” says Wang. “But this is correctable; if you rinse your hair each time you get out of the water, you’re limiting the amount of damage.” As well, restore the cuticles with a good conditioning treatment.
- 6 Coddle wet hair** When wet, hair is at its most fragile, so don’t pull a comb or brush roughly through tangles. And don’t touse, twist or stretch it. Pat it dry with a towel and carefully detangle from tips to scalp with a wide-tooth comb.
- 7 Monitor dryness** Depending on your lifestyle, your hair may be as dry in summer as it is in winter’s indoor heat. “When your hair feels drier, use products with higher levels of conditioning agents or apply hair moisturizers,” says Ruso.

Most hair-product brands offer solutions for a range of hair issues (e.g., dry/damaged, coloured, permed, very curly or fine hair). Still, choosing can be confusing. Consult your dermatologist and a trusted hairstylist for advice. Or check the toll-free numbers on product labels and call the manufacturers for recommendations.

For more information on the science of hair and its care, go to Procter & Gamble at www.pg.com (Search term: Technology Resources) or L’Oréal Hair Science at www.hair-science.com. 

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