

# Curly/coily hair care

Curly or coily hair is the predominant hair type seen in individuals of African ancestry. However, curl patterns vary within races, and there is also overlap between races so this hair type is not the only one seen in people of African descent and is not unique to this group alone. Curly or coily hair resembles a twisted oval rod because the hair curls as it comes out of the scalp. This type of hair varies in direction, shape, and thickness as it grows.

## WHY IS CURLY OR COILY HAIR SO DRY?

Curly or coily hair is typically very dry. This is due to a lower water content in hair fibers. There is also less sebum (oil) along the hair shaft that contributes to the dryness.

## WHY DOES CURLY OR COILY HAIR BREAK OFF SO EASILY?

The curls and coils that make this type of hair so dynamic are the same things that make it easier to damage when styled. The thickness of curly, coily hair is irregular and decreases from the scalp outward. This irregularity interferes with sebum (oil) distribution along the hair, leading to dryness. It also leads to a greater tendency for knots, splits, and "kinks." The variation in thickness along the length of the hair creates weak points that are less flexible. The narrow parts of the hair can develop small cracks. When the hair is dry, it breaks more easily along weak points when tension is applied. This makes the hair more difficult to comb in its natural state.

## STYLING CURLY/COILY HAIR

Certain styling techniques involving chemical relaxers, intense heat, and drying shampoos can further weaken curly or coily hair.

A **chemical relaxer** (frequently termed "perm") is a process where the proteins in the hair (called keratin) are rearranged to make the hair straight. The most commonly used chemicals are sodium hydroxide (lye relaxers) and guanidine, lithium, or potassium hydroxide (no lye relaxers).

A **texturizer** is a chemical relaxer that does not completely straighten the hair but elongates and relaxes the natural curl pattern. By applying the chemical for a shorter period, some of the proteins in the hair are left together. Ammonium thioglycolate is used in some texturizers instead of sodium or guanidine hydroxide.

**Thermal hair straightening** applies direct heat to the hair, causing temporary rearrangement of the hair's proteins. Thermal techniques include hot press/hot combs and flat irons.

**Shampoos** are cleansing agents (detergents) that remove dirt and oil from the scalp and hair. Many shampoos, especially those marketed for oily hair, contain detergents called *sulfates*. The more sulfates in a shampoo, the better it cleanses. However, sulfates can increase dryness, leading to breakage. Sodium *Lauryl* Sulfate is a common sulfate in shampoos that tends to be more drying. On the other hand, Sodium *Laureth* Sulfate is a gentler detergent in shampoos for normal to dry hair.

**Conditioners** are made of (1) water and (2) ingredients which maintain moisture and protect hair from styling. There are different types of conditioners:

- » **Rinse out conditioners** restore moisture after shampooing.
- » **Leave-in conditioners** increase hydration and are used before styling and in between cleansings.

- » **Humectants** reduce breakage that occurs in the setting of dryness.
- » **Reconstructive conditioners** seal damaged areas of the hair and help to retain moisture.

**Detanglers** smooth and repair hair strands, preventing knots and improving manageability.

**Protein treatments** repair dry or damaged hair by reintroducing proteins into the hair shaft. Most treatments should remain on the hair for 10-15 minutes before rinsing out.

**Oils** help to seal in moisture, limit protein loss and reduce hair breakage. For example, coconut oil has been shown to limit protein loss and maintain hair moisture in some studies. Oils work best when applied to damp hair. Thereafter, a curling cream or leave in conditioner can be applied. This often is referred to as the "L.O.C. (liquid, oil, and cream) method".

### Helpful Hair Care Guidelines:

- 1 Use a less drying, sulfate-free shampoo or conditioning shampoo once weekly if your hair is dry.
- 2 Also, if your hair tends to be dry, you can wash with conditioner only ("cowashing") daily to a few times per week with regular conditioner or a product specifically labeled for this purpose. Remember, cowashing may increase product buildup on the hair and scalp.
- 3 Use a cleansing shampoo at least once or twice monthly to remove excess buildup from the scalp. You may need to cleanse your scalp more often if you have eczema or dandruff at the scalp, use a lot of hair products OR primarily co-wash your hair.
- 4 Trim hair regularly (every 2-4 months) to reduce split-ends and prevent breakage of the oldest, most damaged areas of the hair.
- 5 Use protein treatments every month to every 2 months for hair that is chemically processed or very damaged.

For more information on common ingredients in hair care products, visit <https://pedsderm.net/for-patients-families/patient-handouts/curly-coily-hair-care-tips-from-pediatric-dermatologists/>

## SUGGESTIONS FOR HAIRSTYLING

- Make sure braids are loose, especially at the edge of the scalp.
- Do not keep braided styles for longer than 2 months.
- Choose thicker braids, dreadlocks, or locs to minimize tension at the hair root.
- Heavy, long braids, or dreadlocks/locs should be used very infrequently (ideally, shoulder length or shorter are preferred).
- Minimize use of weaves and hair extensions.
- When wearing a weave, avoid glues; use a looser sew-in technique.
- Take out hair weaves/extensions after 3-4 weeks.
- Take breaks between wearing braided styles and extensions.
- Remove any hair style that is causing pain.
- Change hairstyles often, as well as the direction of braids and ponytails.
- Avoid frequent tight hairstyles or "up-dos".
- Limit thermal/heat straightening if hair is chemically relaxed.
- Do not straighten the hair with heat again for at least 1 week after a chemical relaxer.
- Do not straighten hair with heat more than once per week.
- When using heat on the hair, use lower temperatures on flat irons and blow dryers (less than 350°F or low/medium setting).
- If your hair is dry or damaged, give your hair a break with low-tension, natural hairstyles without extensions or by wearing a wig or scarf that is not too tight and can be removed daily.
- When combing, brushing, or "picking out" the hair, avoid starting from the root. Try to start at the ends and gently work upwards.

Adapted from Haskin A, Aguh C. All hairstyles are not created equal: What the dermatologist needs to know about black hairstyling practice and the risk of traction alopecia (TA). *J Am Acad Dermatol*. 2016 Sep;75(3): 606 - 611.



The Society for Pediatric Dermatology  
8365 Keystone Crossing, Suite 107  
Indianapolis, IN 46240  
(317) 202-0224  
[www.pedsderm.net](http://www.pedsderm.net)

**Contributing SPD Members:**  
Brandi M. Kenner-Bell, MD  
Crystal Y. Pourciau, MD, MPH

**Committee Reviewers:**  
Sonia Kamath, MD  
Irene Lara-Corrales, MD

**Expert Reviewers:**  
Marissa Joseph, MD  
Candrice R. Heath, MD

The Society for Pediatric Dermatology and Wiley Publishing cannot be held responsible for any errors or for any consequences arising from the use of the information contained in this handout. Handout originally published in *Pediatric Dermatology: Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Special Issue* (2021).