

# Hair Care Practices in African American Women

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*Hair care in African American women is wrought with historical and cultural issues. Dermatologists need to improve their understanding of hair and scalp disorders in their African American patient population by being informed about the styling methods commonly used by and for these patients. The styling habits described in this article are intended to encompass the hairstyles adapted by a wide range of African American women with varying hair textures.*

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Despite the differences in length and type of hair, the majority of African American women use various methods to straighten their hair. It is estimated that 80% of these women treat their hair with chemical relaxers.<sup>1</sup> The practice of repetitive chemical relaxing may contribute to the common scalp disorders seen in these patients.<sup>1</sup> The desire for straight hair stems from many factors. The most compelling may be the historical value the African American community places on hair texture and length. By the early 1900s, both African American and white communities placed personal merit on lighter skin and long straight hair. Bundles<sup>2</sup> writes, "Well-groomed hair among the black elite meant hair that was not matted or scraggly." A trend toward more natural or Afrocentric styles began in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Ethnic hair care is a billion dollar industry.<sup>1,3</sup> Unlike most other consumer markets, the hair care market is split into general and ethnic segments.<sup>3</sup> Most stores have a separate section for ethnic hair care products. African American hair care is composed of products and services devoted to grooming excessively curly hair, which requires specialized handling and styling techniques, as well as product formulations.

The purpose of this article is to familiarize dermatologists with the often-sensitive subject of hair care practices of their African American women patients. We hope to bridge the cultural gap that causes patient frustration and physician confusion. Questions about hair washing frequency, water phobia, and thermal styling will be addressed. This article aims to provide physicians with a better understanding of the various styling methods and cultural attitudes of this patient population and to help physicians treat their African American patients with hair disorders.

## Structural Properties

African American hair is similar to straight hair in amino acid content; however, it differs in the structure of the hair shaft, which resembles a twisted oval rod.<sup>3</sup> The tight curl pattern makes the hair particularly susceptible to breakage when manipulated. The tensile properties of excessively curly hair indicate that it has a lower strain value at breaking point compared with straight hair.<sup>3</sup> The vast majority of the African American population has a spiral hair shaft, which has a reduced diameter from the scalp outward. The hair of African American people also has a long major axis, giving the hair a flattened elliptical shape. In addition, the scalp hair follicles are curved.<sup>4</sup> As a result of these factors, African American hair has more of a tendency to form knots and longitudinal fissures

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The authors report no conflict of interest.

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