Dear Alice,

The last time I was at the hair cutting salon, the person who washed my hair asked me if I washed my hair everyday. I said I did, and she said she could tell. I'm not sure what she meant by this, but please tell me how she could determine this, and what is the best overall practice for washing hair in terms of frequency. I'm interested in the health of my hair as well as the health of my scalp.

Thanks for you help!

Answer

Dear Reader,

Although you would need to confirm this with your stylist, it's possible she thought that your hair lacked some of its natural oils, which could have been stripped from over-washing. Most shampoos on the market contain water, foaming agents, fragrances, and various amounts of detergents. Shampoos that are designed for oily hair have more detergent than shampoos for non-oily hair. Detergents, while useful for washing away dirt, dead skin, and excess oil, can make hair less manageable and cause it to become dry, brittle, and lose body.

Proper hair and scalp care involves washing your hair regularly to remove the normal buildup of dirt, dead skin cells, oils produced by skin glands, and any other substances you put in your hair. How you define "regularly" is up to you. The frequency with which you wash your hair depends on the unique qualities of your hair such as texture, growth rate, and strength. Your environment will also play a roll as differing climates can impact hair condition. As a basic guideline, people with normal to dry hair can wash once or twice a week, while those with oily hair can probably wash more frequently.

People of different races and ethnicities may have differing hair care needs. For example, people with hair that is tightly coiled, or coarse, may find that shampooing once a week is plenty. This is because oils produced by the scalp can't easily migrate from the hair follicle down the curly/coiled strand of hair, so oil build up happens slowly. On the other hand, folks with straight, fine hair may notice oil build up sooner and may wash a few times a week or even every day. If you are flummoxed by how often to wash, you may want to speak with a stylist who is familiar with your hair type. Or, maybe a friend or family member who has great hair and a similar hair type can pass along some tips.

Here are some tips and different products to consider when choosing a shampoo for your hair...
Use a protein-based shampoo. An acid rinse can help to restore a smooth cuticle and shine to your hair. Try white vinegar and water, or lemon and water. Lemon-based shampoo can also help cut excess oil. A chamomile shampoo, which has mild bleaching properties, can add highlights to lighter hair. A henna shampoo, which has mild reddening properties, may add a burst of reddish undertones to darker hair. Jojoba-based shampoo is successful in treating scalp conditions as well as dissolving sebum buildup. Try alternating the shampoo you use. Change brands every few months to combat buildup. Diet plays an important role in hair health; eat a healthy balance of foods.

Next time you go for a cut, you could ask how often you should wash your hair based on its condition and composition. Perhaps your stylist will have a recommendation for a shampoo and hair tips. Whether you find yourself in the doctor's office or hair salon, if a specialist says something you don't understand, don't be afraid to ask! It's their job to provide a service as well as educate you about what they're doing.

Alice!
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