

# Healthy Hair Care Practices: Caring for African Hair Types

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## ABSTRACT

The African hair type is unique in its structure, though biochemically similar to naturally straight hair. These days, many women of African descent prefer to keep their natural hair and shun both chemical and non-chemical hair straightening. Healthy hair care practices are essential to the maintenance of natural African hair. Poor hair care practices may lead to moderate or even severe hair damage.

There is unbridled access to a myriad of information on the world wide web today, with a lot of this information being inaccurate. Thus it is increasingly important for physicians to advise their patients on appropriate healthy hair care practices for their hair type.

**Keywords:** African hair type, natural hair, hair care practices

## ABSTRAIT

Le type de cheveux africain est unique dans sa structure, bien que biochimiquement similaire aux cheveux naturellement raides. De nos jours, de nombreuses femmes d'ascendance africaine préfèrent garder leurs cheveux naturels et évitent le lissage chimique et non chimique. Des pratiques de soins capillaires sains sont essentielles au maintien des cheveux naturels africains. De mauvaises pratiques de soins capillaires peuvent entraîner des dommages modérés, voire graves, aux cheveux.

Il existe aujourd'hui un accès illimité à une myriade d'informations sur le World Wide Web, dont beaucoup sont inexactes. Il est donc de plus en plus important pour les médecins de conseiller leurs patients sur les pratiques de soins capillaires sains appropriés à leur type de cheveux.

**Mots-clés :** type de cheveux africains, cheveux naturels, pratiques de soins capillaires

## Introduction

The beauty standards regarding hair care and hairstyling have shifted in recent times, with many women of African descent transitioning back to wearing their 'natural hair' with a consequent downward trend in the use of chemical and non-chemical hair straighteners.<sup>1</sup> This has made it increasingly necessary for physicians to understand the hair care needs of their clients and patients and advise them on appropriate healthy hair practices. This review aims to discuss African hair types and optimal hair care practices.

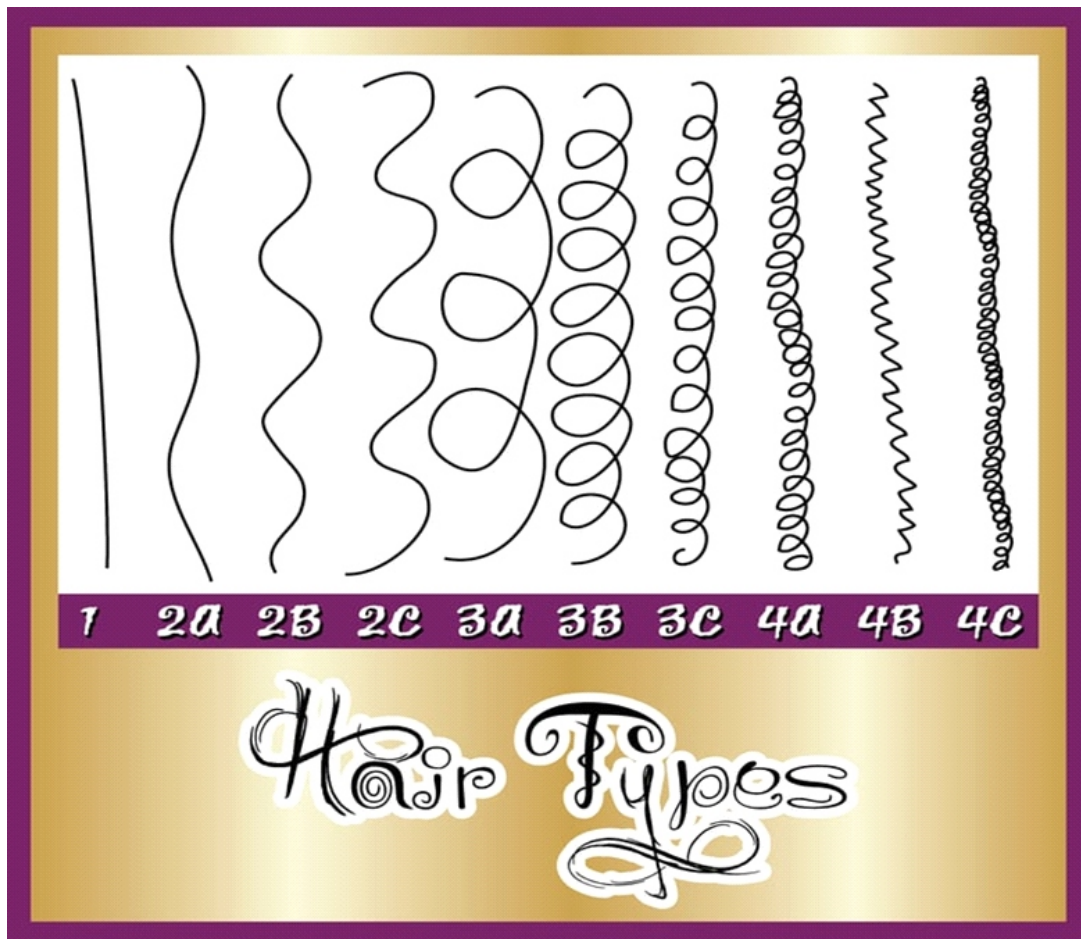
## Structure of Hair

The major difference between naturally straight hair and ethnic hair is the follicular morphology; otherwise, they are biochemically similar.<sup>2,3</sup> The

African hair type has curved hair follicles with elliptically shaped strands.<sup>3</sup> This predisposes to knot formation, shrinkage and tangling.<sup>4</sup> African hair has reduced water content and decreased sebaceous gland activity, making it prone to dryness.<sup>4,5</sup> This, in addition to the curl pattern, makes it easy to break during styling.

## Texture of Hair

Hair exists in various textures and often reflects the wearer's personal style. Various classification systems for hair types exist, including the Andre Walker hair typing system, the FIA hair typing system, and the LOIS hair typing system. The Andre Walker hair typing system (Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2) will be used for this discourse.<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 1: HAIR TEXTURE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEMS**

Types	Characteristics
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- This is <b>straight hair</b>. It reflects the most sheen and is the most resilient hair of all the hair types.</li> <li>- It is hard to damage, but it is difficult to curl this hair texture.</li> </ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- This is <b>wavy hair</b>. Its texture and sheen range somewhere between straight and curly hair. Wavy hair is also more likely to become frizzy than straight hair.</li> <li>- Type A wavy hair can easily alternate between straight and curly styles, whilst Type B and C wavy hair are resistant to styling.</li> </ul>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- This is <b>curly hair</b>. It is known to have an S-shape. The curl pattern may resemble a lowercase "s", uppercase "S", an uppercase "Z" or lowercase "z".</li> <li>- This hair type is usually voluminous, "weather-dependent, and damage-prone.</li> </ul>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- This is <b>kinky hair</b>. It features a tightly coiled curl pattern (or no discernible curl pattern)</li> <li>- It is often fragile with a very high density. This hair type shrinks when wet. It has fewer cuticle layers than other hair types whilst being more susceptible to damage.</li> </ul>

**Table 1: ANDRE WALKER HAIR TYPING SYSTEM<sup>6</sup>**

# What's Your Hair Type?



Figure 2: Identifying the Hair types

## The African Hair Type

Coarse and kinky hair is generally referred to as "African hair".<sup>4</sup> The African hair type is naturally curly. Dark-skinned Africans have different hair texture types and mostly fall under curly hair types: 3a, 3b, 3c, 4a, 4b, and 4c.<sup>6</sup> The best way to see the true curl pattern of the African hair type is to wash the hair and air dry it without using hair care products.<sup>6</sup>

## The Care of the African Hair Type

### Hair and Scalp Cleansing

Hair and scalp cleansing should be done regularly. Inadequate cleaning may lead to an increased incidence of scalp conditions like dandruff and seborrheic dermatitis.<sup>7</sup> Excessive shampooing, on the other hand, can cause increased hair breakage.<sup>8</sup> Frequency of shampooing is mostly determined by activity. A frequency of once to thrice per week is

adequate.<sup>7</sup>

Even though they lather more, sulphate shampoos tend to be more drying and can lead to hair breakage, as they strip the hair shaft of sebum. Protein-based conditioning shampoos tend to strengthen the hair shaft, while ceramide-based shampoos reduce hair breakage. Caffeine shampoos are anecdotally said to stimulate the hair follicles to grow hair.

Co-washing involves the use of only conditioners to wash the hair and scalp.<sup>9</sup> This is less drying for the hair and scalp; however, to prevent product build-up over time, it is important to use clarifying shampoos after three to four co-washes intermittently.<sup>10</sup>

Pre-shampooing involves using natural oils and sometimes other homemade recipes to lift adherent scales from the scalp prior to shampooing. Natural oils are most effective in this regard.<sup>11</sup> When shampooing, ideally, lukewarm water should be used, as hot water is sebum stripping; the fingertip pads and not fingernails should be used to wash the scalp, and a conditioner should be used post shampooing.

### **Hair Conditioners**

Hair conditioners are of various types and are intended to meet the varying needs of the hair and scalp. They can be hydrating conditioners that contain emollients or strengthening conditioners that contain proteins, silicones, and polymers to help damaged hair.<sup>4,12</sup> Deep conditioners require heat to promote penetration of the emollients into the hair cuticle. These can be applied once a month.<sup>4</sup> Some conditioners are protein-based; these help to strengthen the hair shafts.<sup>5</sup>

Hot oil treatments involve using natural oils and butters that are warmed in a water bath before applying to the hair.<sup>4</sup> A shower cap is then worn over the hair, or the individual sits under a hairdryer to allow for penetration into the hair shaft. This treatment can be done fortnightly. Leave in conditioners aid hair manageability and minimize styling damage.<sup>12</sup>

### **Moisturize And Seal**

Natural oils and butter have been used for ages to combat hair dryness. Some like coconut oil, avocado oil, and olive oil can penetrate the hair shaft.<sup>13</sup> Sealing oils, including Jamaican black castor oil, jojoba oil and grapeseed oil, seal moisture into the hair shaft. Butters like shea butter and cocoa butter also do the same. Spritzes made from adding oils to water with or without essential oils stave off hair dryness and breakage when applied daily to the hair and scalp.

Essential oils can be incorporated into a healthy hair care regimen; however, knowledge about their use and precautions for use are essential.<sup>14</sup> Some essential oils that can promote the overall wellbeing of the hair and scalp include rosemary, peppermint, cypress, sage, cedarwood, ylang-ylang, lavender, Rose chamomile and Geranium essential oils.<sup>14</sup>

Dry breakage-prone hair will benefit from the use of Lavender, Rosemary, Sandalwood and Geranium essential oils. Some essential oils that can ameliorate occasional scalp flakiness include Tea tree, Lemon, Lavender, Cedarwood and Thyme essential oils. Essential oils should not be applied directly to the scalp but rather diluted in carrier oils before use.<sup>14</sup> Average usage rate of essential oils is six drops of oil to every 30mls of carrier oil.

### **Hair Styling**

When applied to the hair, excessive heat causes a myriad of issues, from Trichorrhexis Nodosa to hot comb alopecia.<sup>15</sup> Best practice would be to have the hair "air dried," but the low to medium setting is preferable if heat must be used. Heat protectant products containing silicone should be employed to reduce hair damage. The frequency of heat application should be about once weekly, especially if the hair is chemically treated.

Chemical relaxers cause hair fragility by reducing cysteine, citrulline, and arginine in the hair structure.<sup>16</sup> Their use can predispose to central centrifugal cicatricial alopecia<sup>17</sup> and traction alopecia, with some recent malignancy claims being attributed to them. Hair breakage has been reported

with both lye and non-lye hair relaxers. Thus, relaxers should be used with caution and only by professional hairstylists. Touch-ups should only be done to newly grown hair every two to three months. Chemical relaxers should never be applied to hair that has already been relaxed.

Protective styles like braids and cornrows can be worn to reduce the frequency of salon visits and are best applied to natural hair, reducing the risk of traction alopecia.<sup>18</sup> Wigs and extensions are also employed. Satin hair wear, bonnets and pillowcases tend to reduce hair breakage.

Hair colouring can cause drying and hair breakage as they are formulated with ammonia and peroxide, and they can also cause irritant and allergic contact dermatitis.<sup>19</sup> Henna can be used for natural hair. It has strengthening and conditioning properties and can also be used as a hair colourant.<sup>20</sup> Healthy lifestyle choices can also positively impact the well-being of hair.<sup>21</sup>

In conclusion, patients have increased access to information on the world wide web. This information may be inaccurate; thus, it is expedient for dermatologists to be knowledgeable about proper African hair care practices and advise their patients when such conversations arise.

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