SYMPTOM

Dry hair

Dry hair is hair that feels rough, looks dull, and breaks easily.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Rough, dull, frizzy hair that tangles or breaks easily

WHERE IT IS FELT
Hair on the scalp

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Heat styling, chemical treatments, frequent or harsh washing

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Scalp blistering or severe pain after chemical treatment

USUALLY LASTS
Until damaged hair grows out or the cause changes

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Persists despite gentle care or comes with other symptoms

Overview

Dry hair feels rough and may look dull, frizzy, or brittle. It can tangle easily and may develop split ends or break when brushed.

The visible hair shaft is made mainly of a protein called keratin. It does not contain living cells, so damage to it cannot heal in the way skin can. Conditioners and oils can make damaged hair smoother and reduce further breakage, but their effects are temporary.

Dry hair is not the same as a dry scalp. A dry scalp affects the skin and may cause itching or small flakes. You can have dry hair with an oily scalp, a dry scalp with normal hair, or both at the same time.

Dryness is often related to hair care, chemical treatments, weather, or natural hair texture. Less often, a change in hair condition may occur alongside a medical or nutritional problem.

What it may feel or look like

Dry hair may:

Breakage produces short pieces of hair with uneven ends. This differs from hair shedding, in

which a full-length hair comes away from its root. Both can happen at the same time.

Curly and coily hair may feel drier because natural scalp oil does not travel along the bends of the hair shaft as easily. This is a normal feature of hair structure, not necessarily a sign of disease.

- Feel rough, coarse, or straw-like
- Look dull rather than shiny
- Become frizzy or affected by static
- Tangle or form knots easily
- Develop split or pale-looking ends
- Snap during washing, brushing, or styling
- Be difficult to shape or keep smooth

Common causes

Common causes

Heat from straighteners, curling irons, hot combs, or frequent blow-drying can weaken the hair's outer protective layer. High temperatures and repeated passes over the same section increase damage.

Bleaching, permanent colouring, relaxing, perming, and some keratin treatments alter the hair shaft. Combining treatments or repeating them before the hair has recovered can lead to brittleness and breakage.

Frequent washing, strong shampoos, very hot water, and vigorous towel-drying may remove protective oils or increase friction. Sun, wind, dry air, salt water, and swimming-pool chemicals can also leave hair feeling dry.

Tight hairstyles, rough brushing, and pulling through tangles can worsen breakage, especially when hair is wet and more easily stretched.

Less common medical contributors

An underactive thyroid can be associated with dry or coarse hair, often alongside symptoms such as tiredness, feeling unusually cold, constipation, or skin changes.

Poor nutrition may affect new hair growth. Possible contributors include inadequate protein or deficiencies related to a restricted diet, an eating disorder, digestive illness, or another health condition. Dry hair alone does not show which nutrient, if any, is lacking.

Some medicines and inherited conditions can change the structure or texture of hair. These are less common and usually cause other noticeable changes, such as marked breakage, hair loss, or symptoms elsewhere in the body.

Problems needing prompt assessment

Dryness itself is rarely urgent. However, chemical products can burn the scalp or trigger an allergic reaction. Severe pain, blistering, raw skin, or rapidly increasing redness after a treatment needs prompt medical advice.

When to seek medical care

Seek same-day medical care if a hair product or chemical treatment causes severe scalp pain, blistering, open skin, spreading redness, marked swelling, or discharge. Rinse off the product according to its safety instructions and do not apply another chemical treatment.

Call emergency services if a product reaction causes trouble breathing, faintness, or swelling of the lips, tongue, or throat. These may be signs of a severe allergic reaction.

Book a routine appointment if the dryness:

These features do not identify a particular diagnosis. They help show when it may be useful to look beyond ordinary hair damage.

- Does not improve after several weeks of gentler hair care
- Starts suddenly without an obvious change in products or styling
- Comes with substantial breakage, thinning, or bald patches
- Occurs with fatigue, feeling cold, weight change, or skin changes
- Develops alongside a very limited diet or concerns about nutrition
- Is accompanied by persistent scalp itching, scaling, sores, or pain

How the cause is found

A clinician will usually ask when the change began and whether you use heat, bleach, dye, relaxers, perms, or other chemical treatments. They may also ask about swimming, sun exposure, diet, medicines, recent illness, and symptoms affecting your skin or general health.

They may examine your scalp and look at the pattern of breakage. The hair shaft can sometimes be viewed under magnification to check for structural damage.

Tests are not always needed. Blood tests may be considered when your history or other

symptoms suggest a thyroid problem, nutritional deficiency, or another medical condition. Broad testing without supporting symptoms may not explain hair dryness.

Treatment and self-care

The main approach is to reduce further damage while healthier hair grows.

Wash with lukewarm rather than very hot water. Apply shampoo mainly to the scalp, allowing the lather to rinse through the lengths without scrubbing them. Use conditioner after washing, concentrating on the middle and ends.

A leave-in conditioner, detangling product, or small amount of hair oil may reduce friction and improve smoothness. These products coat the shaft; they do not permanently repair split ends.

Handle wet hair gently. Blot or wrap it in a soft towel rather than rubbing. Detangle slowly with your fingers or a wide-toothed comb, beginning at the ends.

Limit direct heat where practical. If you use a heated tool, choose the lowest effective temperature and avoid repeatedly heating the same section. Allowing hair to air-dry partly before blow-drying may shorten heat exposure.

Space out chemical treatments and avoid applying different processes close together. Stop using a product that causes burning or marked irritation. Follow its instructions, including any recommended allergy test.

Wear a hat or cover hair during prolonged sun exposure. After swimming, rinse out salt or pool water and condition the hair. Trimming removes split ends and may prevent them from splitting farther up the shaft.

Avoid starting high-dose supplements simply because your hair feels dry. Supplements do not correct styling damage, and some can interfere with laboratory tests or cause harm when taken unnecessarily.

What to expect

Hair that is already significantly damaged will remain altered until it is trimmed or grows out. Smoother handling and conditioning can improve its appearance and reduce breakage in the meantime.

Improvement is gradual because scalp hair grows slowly. The timing depends on hair length, the degree of damage, and whether the cause continues. If an underlying health problem is

contributing, the texture may improve as that problem is addressed, although the existing damaged lengths may not fully recover.

Ongoing care matters most for hair that is bleached, chemically straightened, tightly curled, or regularly exposed to heat.

Common questions

Can dry hair be repaired permanently?

Not usually. Products can temporarily smooth and protect the existing shaft, but they cannot restore it to an undamaged state. New growth can be protected, and split ends can be trimmed.

Does washing hair every day cause dryness?

It can contribute for some people, especially when combined with strong shampoo, hot water, or a naturally dry hair texture. Other people tolerate daily washing. The products used and how the hair is handled also matter.

Is dry hair a sign of an underactive thyroid?

It can occur with an underactive thyroid, but dry hair by itself is not enough to suggest that diagnosis. Thyroid testing is more likely to be useful when there are other symptoms or examination findings.

Are hair oils a treatment?

Oils may reduce friction, improve shine, and help limit moisture loss. They do not treat every cause or permanently repair damaged hair. Use a small amount if heavy products make your scalp greasy or irritated.

Sources

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