SYMPTOM

Oily hair

Oily hair is hair that quickly looks or feels greasy from scalp oil.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
My hair looks greasy soon after washing

WHERE IT IS FELT
Hair and skin of the scalp

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Scalp oil production, product buildup, sweating

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Painful spreading scalp redness, swelling, pus, or fever

USUALLY LASTS
Days to ongoing, based on scalp oil and hair care

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Persistent oiliness with itching, scaling, hair loss, or acne

Overview

Oily hair looks or feels greasy because of sebum, the natural oil made by glands in your skin. Sebum protects the scalp and hair from becoming too dry. It can travel from the scalp along the hair shaft, especially in straight or fine hair.

Some people naturally produce more scalp oil than others. Hair care habits, sweating, hormonal changes, and certain scalp conditions can also affect how oily your hair appears.

Oily hair is a symptom, not a disease. By itself, it is usually harmless and does not mean that your hair or scalp is dirty. Changes in washing or hair products may be enough to manage it. Other symptoms, such as itching or thick scales, may point to a condition that needs treatment.

What it may feel or look like

Your hair may:

The scalp may feel normal. If you also have itching, redness, soreness, flakes, crusts, spots, or hair loss, the oiliness may be part of another scalp problem.

Oil often shows most around the hairline, crown, and behind the ears. It may be more noticeable in fine or straight hair because oil moves along these strands more easily.

- Look shiny, flat, darkened, or separated into greasy strands
- Feel slick or heavy near the roots
- Lose volume soon after washing
- Hold onto sweat, odors, or styling products
- Need washing more often than it used to

Common causes

Common causes

Natural differences in sebum production are a frequent reason for oily hair. Oil production can be more active during puberty and may shift with other hormonal changes.

Sweat from exercise, heat, hats, or close-fitting head coverings can mix with sebum and make hair feel greasy. This does not necessarily mean the scalp is producing more oil.

Shampoos, conditioners, dry shampoo, oils, waxes, and styling products can collect on the scalp or hair. Conditioner placed directly on the scalp may weigh down fine or oily hair. Incomplete rinsing can have a similar effect.

Washing less often allows more sebum to build up. However, harsh shampoos or vigorous scrubbing can irritate the scalp rather than solve the problem.

Less common causes

Seborrheic dermatitis can cause greasy or dry-looking flakes, itching, and inflamed skin. It often affects the scalp, eyebrows, sides of the nose, or areas around the ears. Dandruff is a milder form affecting the scalp.

Contact dermatitis is irritation or an allergic reaction caused by something touching the skin. Hair dye, fragrances, preservatives, and other hair-product ingredients may cause itching, burning, redness, or a rash.

Hormonal conditions can sometimes affect oil production. If oiliness develops alongside irregular periods, new coarse facial or body hair, or persistent acne, arrange a routine medical appointment. These symptoms can have several possible causes and need to be considered together.

When to seek medical care

Oily hair alone is not usually urgent.

Arrange a routine appointment if it persists despite reasonable hair-care changes, suddenly becomes much worse, or comes with ongoing itching, scaling, acne, sores, or hair loss. You should also seek advice if scalp symptoms interfere with sleep or daily life.

Seek same-day medical care for a painful or rapidly worsening scalp area with spreading redness, warmth, swelling, pus, or fever. These can be signs of an infection rather than simple oiliness.

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

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the change began and how quickly hair becomes oily after washing. They may ask about shampoos, conditioners, styling products, hair dye, head coverings, sweating, medicines, and other skin or hormonal symptoms.

They will usually examine the scalp and nearby skin. The pattern of redness, flakes, spots, broken hairs, or hair loss can help narrow down the cause.

Tests are often unnecessary. If another condition is suspected, testing may include a skin sample, testing for a product allergy, or blood tests based on your other symptoms. Oiliness alone does not usually require hormone testing.

Treatment and self-care

Choose a washing schedule based on how oily your scalp becomes. Some people with oily scalps may prefer daily shampooing, while others need it less often. Concentrate shampoo on the scalp, massage gently with your fingertips, and rinse thoroughly. Avoid scratching with your nails.

Apply conditioner mainly to the middle and ends of the hair if putting it near the roots makes oiliness worse. Using fewer styling products may help if buildup is contributing.

Dry shampoo can absorb oil for a short time, but it does not clean the scalp. Wash it out regularly and stop using it if you develop itching, burning, or a rash.

If you have dandruff or greasy flakes, an over-the-counter anti-dandruff shampoo may help. Different products contain different active ingredients, so follow the label. Ask a pharmacist or

healthcare professional for advice if you are unsure which product suits you or if symptoms continue.

Avoid applying lemon juice, undiluted essential oils, household detergents, or other harsh substances to the scalp. They can irritate the skin. If a new product seems to trigger symptoms, stop using it and note its ingredients.

A clinician may recommend prescription treatment if oiliness is linked to seborrheic dermatitis, contact dermatitis, infection, or another condition. Treatment then targets that cause rather than the oil itself.

What to expect

Oil caused by sweat or product buildup may improve after washing and adjusting hair products. Naturally active oil glands may require ongoing hair-care changes rather than a permanent fix.

Dandruff and seborrheic dermatitis often improve with treatment but can return. Sudden or persistent changes may take longer to settle if they are connected to skin inflammation or hormonal symptoms.

Common questions

Does oily hair mean I am not washing properly?

No. Sebum production differs between people, and fine or straight hair can show oil more quickly. Washing habits and product buildup can contribute, but oiliness is not proof of poor hygiene.

Does frequent washing make the scalp produce more oil?

Washing removes existing oil but is not known to train the oil glands to produce extra sebum. Very harsh products or forceful scrubbing can irritate the scalp, so use a gentle approach.

Can oily hair cause hair loss?

Oil itself does not usually cause hair loss. Inflammation, infection, scratching, or another scalp condition may cause shedding or breakage. Seek medical advice if you notice thinning, bald patches, broken hairs, or scalp pain.

Why are my roots oily but my ends dry?

Sebum begins at the scalp and may not reach the ends of long, curly, chemically treated, or heat-damaged hair. Shampooing the scalp and conditioning the lengths may help balance these different needs.

Can diet cause oily hair?

A single food is unlikely to explain oily hair. Major or sudden changes are better assessed by looking at scalp symptoms, products, medicines, and hormonal signs rather than restricting foods without medical advice.

Sources

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- American Academy of Dermatology Association. "Seborrheic dermatitis: Overview."
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