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The Unfortunate Reality of Dry Shampoo

It's convenient, but bad for the scalp. So bad it might lead to hair loss.

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HEALTH

There's a common pattern with socially constructed beauty norms. Society insists women do a ridiculous thing to look good (see: unnaturally small waists; looking awake and vibrant 24/7; heels as standard formalwear.) Women, being people, clamber to find short-cuts to accomplish said thing as easily as possible (see: corsets; makeup; removable heels.) The arms race continues until the norm goes away (see: menswear-for-women) or a harder-to-imitate beauty trend emerges (balayage).

You can see this dynamic at work in a newish, miraculous, terrifying innovation called dry shampoo.

The stuff is the best friend of the lazy-yet-vain. When sprayed onto hair, it soaks up oil, giving the impression of freshly washed and styled coif in seconds. Since I discovered dry shampoo a few years ago, I have regularly slept in for an extra 15 minutes while the rest of the world climbs groggily into their showers like a bunch of chumps. (Well, everyone except Jim Hamblin). *Then*, I would get to skip the blow-drying and heat-styling in which chumps

of the female persuasion often engage—another 10 or 15 golden snooze minutes. With just one product, I was able to ~~add another reality TV show to my rotation~~ read more books for work.

When I woke up, I would tip my head upside down, spray on the shampoo, shake my head a bit, flip it back over and grin at the reflection of my fluffy bouffant, in a move I like to call the Grimy Laker Girl.

“That’s disgusting,” my boyfriend would say. “You know people stopped cleaning themselves with powders in like the 18th century, right?”

I ignored him, since he didn’t even own body wash until he met me.

I would look and smell clean when I was anything but. At first, the dry shampoo was just a stop-gap until the next day, when I would cleanse myself with actual water. But eventually my dry-shampoo days started outnumbering the regular-shampoo ones. Some mornings I would even do my trusty “15-minute Dumbbell Blast” routine and then head on into the office, my head coated in a thin patina of rice starch and “clean fragrance.”

I started recommending dry shampoo to busy and tired female friends, in the conspiratorial tone that Not-An-Actresses use in infomercials. “Feel my hair. FEEL IT,” I would demand. Then, the big reveal: “I haven’t showered since Tuesday.”

Gradually, though, I began to notice something disturbing. The two sides of my hair looked like they were slowly drifting away from each other at the part. Granted, it’s hard for me to tell when my hair is thinning. I am half Scandinavian, and nowhere is this more evident than my scalp, which, with its sparse, wispy growth, conjures the snowy white tundras of Lapland.

Still, a few dozen strands would defect from my head and onto my fingers each time I showered. It was a lot, even for me.

“Does my hair look thinner to you?” I asked my boyfriend one morning.

“Hmm, yeah maybe,” he said.

Figuring he has expertise in this area (he’s basically bald), the next morning I anxiety-Google “dry shampoo hair loss.”

I saw a lot of headlines like, “Is Your Dry Shampoo Making You Go Bald?” (Reader, the answer is never “no.”) I also found a terrifying photo, posted on Facebook by a woman in Belfast, showing a bald spot she believes was caused by over-using dry shampoo. “Dry shampoo caused me to now have this bald patch on my head, (which I still have and it may or may not grow back, but nothing can be done),” she wrote, somehow summing up the fears of all of womankind in a single parenthetical. “Just wash your hair people!”

Of course, the problem with the wise woman’s counsel is that I’ve previously read (and written) about how showering and shampooing too often is *also* not good for your dreads. Damned if you ‘poo, it seems, damned if you don’t.

To get to the bottom of this, I unscientifically polled 11 hair experts and dermatologists about how frequently, if ever, I’m supposed to launder my hair, and with what.

According to them, women have fallen prey to a mass delusion that dry shampoo is actually shampoo. It’s not, in that it doesn’t clean your hair. It soaks up excess oil, and in the process, it irritates your scalp. That can lead to hair loss, as can the clumping that dry shampoo and other hair sprays sometimes cause.

“[Dry shampoo] deposits substances to coat the follicle that can build up,” Sonia Batra, a dermatologist in Los Angeles, told me. “The resulting inflammation can weaken the follicles and increase shedding. These products can also cause hair follicles to stick together, so that a hair that would normally shed during brushing may take two or three strands along with it.”

The good news is that only three of my respondents asserted definitively that yes, dry shampoo makes hair fall out. Sadly, the bar they set for its depilatory potential was pretty low. One hair stylist said all it would take is using it three days in a row, while a dermatologist advised against three days per week, consecutive or not. Dhaval G. Bhanusali, a dermatologist in New York, drew an even harder line, saying dry shampoo on more than two days per week would be excessive. Several people noted that, whatever they do, people should avoid dry shampoos that use talc, a substance found in baby powders that has been at the center of several cancer lawsuits involving Johnson & Johnson.

Sigh, first canned soups, and now this? Must all time-savers be secretly harmful? I asked the experts how often, then, we should regular-shampoo. Their consensus was every two days or so. Or even more often, if you, like yours truly, have very fine hair that starts to look like the unctuous coat of a baby sea lion about three hours after you step out of the shower.

Oh, and the idea that you can somehow “train” your hair to “adjust” to less-frequent shampoos—a dream of mine since I read this *Hairpin* article five years ago—is a myth, according to my killjoy respondents.

“Cutting back on how frequently you shampoo won't necessarily cure an oily scalp or cause your scalp to produce less oil. You either have an oily scalp or you don't—just like your complexion,” said Rebecca Kazin, an assistant professor of dermatology at Johns Hopkins.

It's time for me to set a trend that can compensate for all this bleak news. I hear models are shaving their heads, y'all. Get on it.