

# Afro-textured hair

**This leaflet explains more about afro-textured hair, common causes of hair loss amongst people with afro-textured hair and some recommendations for hair care.**

Afro-textured hair is the term used to describe curly, kinky, coiled hair that generally grows upwards (as opposed to curly hair that grows downwards). It is generally thought of as the hair that is naturally seen in people of African descent, although this is not the rule. Afro-textured hair can be styled in many ways, making it versatile and adaptable. Due to the nature of the curl pattern and differences in the hair shaft, research has shown that Afro-textured hair is more fragile when compared to Caucasian or Asian hair. Afro-textured hair also grows more slowly; more hairs are found in the telogen (resting) phase of the hair cycle and the number of anagen (growing) hairs is reduced on comparison. The curly nature also makes Afro-textured hair much more prone to knots and dryness.

Importantly, many people with Afro-textured hair partake in hair styling practices which can be damaging. All these factors can contribute to problems with hair growth and maintenance. This guide aims to discuss some of these practices and provide recommendations for healthy hair. Three common causes of hair loss or breakage caused by damaging hair practices are traction alopecia, acquired trichorrhexis nodosa and central centrifugal cicatricial alopecia.

## ***Traction alopecia (TA)***

TA is where prolonged or repeated pulling forces put strain on the hair follicles, causing the hair to be prematurely uprooted. Pain, redness, dimpling of the scalp and small pus filled lumps (pustules) soon after installing a particular hairstyle are early signs. TA is commonly seen at the periphery of the hairline (commonly known as a person's "edges") but can occur anywhere on the scalp where the hair is being pulled. Whilst traction alopecia is preventable and can be reversed with care, it can lead to scarring, causing permanent hair loss in later stages.

Many different hair practices have been implicated in TA and are well documented, however many women find it difficult to know how to minimise the risk whilst maintaining their hair in manageable hairstyles that they like.

## ***Acquired trichorrhexis nodosa (ATN)***

ATN is dry, brittle hair characterised by breaking of hair shafts. It is a common form of hair breakage, caused by extrinsic insults, such as heat or chemical agents. Although ATN is seen in all ethnicities, structural differences in Afro hair make it more prone to ATN, and styling practices such as chemical relaxers, hair dyes, thermal straighteners and even combing can all contribute to ATN. The damage is additive; harmful styling practices cause gradual weathering of the hair shaft, although the cause is almost always

multifactorial. Small white nodules are often seen throughout the hair, which correspond to loss of the hair cuticle. This condition can take two to four years to completely resolve, but optimising hair care and stopping damaging practices are crucial to hair regrowth

### **Central centrifugal cicatricial alopecia (CCCA)**

Central centrifugal cicatricial alopecia is a form of scarring (permanent) hair loss and is the most common cause of hair loss in women of African descent. The hair loss starts in the centre of the scalp and spreads outwards, hence its name. The disease is characterised by inflammation around the hair follicles, which leads to follicle destruction and scarring. CCCA was previously known as “hot comb alopecia”, as it was thought that hair care practices were the most important factor in the disease process. Currently, the cause is not completely understood, but it is most likely due to a combination of multiple factors, including genetics and a predisposition to autoimmunity and fibrosis.

## **Cultural significance**

Hair has an important position in the black community, particularly amongst women. The significance of hair within black history is well documented; indeed, hairstyles were historically used to indicate a person’s tribe and even their place in society in many African cultures. The slave trade carried millions of Africans across the Atlantic and Afro-textured hair was frowned upon by slave masters and society as a whole, causing many slaves to develop a negative relationship with their hair. Following emancipation, straighter hair became more fashionable, as many African Americans sought to adhere to European beauty standards. Furthermore, straighter hair was marketed as more manageable and versatile and many African Americans began using chemical relaxers and heat tools. Indeed, America’s first black female millionaire, Madam CJ Walker made her fortune selling such products post-emancipation.

The Afro became popular during the 1960s civil rights movement, often serving as a political statement. The 2000s ushered a new natural hair movement, with many black women choosing to wear their hair in its natural state, many after years of relaxing their hair. The term “big chop” is used to describe cutting off a woman’s relaxed hair so that she can grow new, naturally curly and kinky hair again. Natural hair influencers on social media, YouTube and personal blogs have undoubtedly played an important role in this movement, empowering many women to familiarise themselves with their natural hair, should they choose to do so.

Today, there are numerous hairstyles that are popular amongst people of African descent. For some, hairstyles are chosen based on ease of maintenance, while for others, hairstyles can be chosen to reflect a religious or social position, such as dreadlocks amongst the Rastafarian community. It’s important to remember that many women will cycle through several different hairstyles as per their personal preference and no hairstyle is superior to another, although certain habits and methods of styling increase the risk of hair damage and loss.

Many women have had their chosen hairstyle deemed as unprofessional in the workplace or have been ridiculed for the way they choose to style their hair. Apart from this, many black women spend significant amounts of time and money on their hair and hair loss can sometimes impact not only a woman's self-esteem but their mental health and professional and personal relationships. It's important for clinicians to consider the significance each woman's hair holds for them personally and to remain sensitive.

Below is a non-exhaustive description of some common hairstyles seen within the black community and some important considerations.

## Natural hair

Afro-textured hair can broadly be divided into two types – natural and relaxed.

Natural hair is hair that has not been treated with chemical relaxers and is generally considered to be stronger than chemically processed hair, as it can withstand greater stress from traction and grooming. Natural hair is however much more prone to tangling given its coarse and kinky texture.



### General recommendations for people with Afro-textured hair

- A basic maintenance routine for Afro-textured hair should include washing the hair every one-two weeks, applying a deep wash-out conditioner, gently towel drying and applying a leave in conditioner.
- Afro-textured hair needs more moisture than Caucasian or Asian hair. A lack of moisture causes stress along the hair shaft, which can lead to breakage even at low levels of tension. Women should find a regime for keeping their hair moisturised that works for them. This may include lotions, creams, and/or oils.
- Excessive manipulation of the hair increases the risk of damage.
- Hair should be combed using a soft brush with widely spaced bristles and coated tips or a wooden comb with wide teeth.
- Tight ponytails and buns are deemed high risk for traction alopecia.
- At bedtime, hair should be put into loose plaits or twists and covered with a satin or silk cap or scarf. Alternatively, sleeping on a satin or silk pillowcase will achieve the same goal of minimising friction.

## Relaxed hair

A relaxer is an alkaline cream used to chemically straighten curly, “natural” hair. The cream is applied to hair strands, left in for some time and washed out using a neutralising shampoo, which returns the hair to its original pH. Chemical relaxers work by breaking hydrogen and disulphide bonds, which permanently straightens the hair. This causes loss of tensile strength, which leads to an increased risk of hair breakage. As the hair grows, relaxer will need to be reapplied to the new natural hair so that its texture matches the relaxed hair.



There are two main types of chemical relaxer: lye and no-lye. The main active ingredient in lye-based relaxers is sodium hydroxide and they may be preferred by professional hair stylists because they are believed to straighten the hair more effectively and cause less damage to the hair itself. However, they are more alkaline and therefore can potentially increase the risk of burns and scalp irritation. Low-lye relaxers exist, which have a lower concentration of the active ingredient. No-lye relaxers are found in over the counter, relax at home kits. They contain potassium hydroxide, calcium guanidine or lithium hydroxide. These are less alkaline and are less likely to cause scalp irritation. However, no-lye relaxers are thought to be more likely to cause dry, brittle hair as the chemicals produce minerals which can build up on the scalp.

## Recommendations

- For touch-ups, relaxer should only be applied to new growth and never to hair that has already been straightened. This can make the hair irreparably fragile, leading to hair breakage.
- Relaxers should not be used more frequently than every 6-10 weeks and taking breaks from relaxers for some months can be helpful to give the hair a rest.
- The relaxer should never be allowed to burn the scalp. There is no benefit to leaving a relaxer on longer than specified on the instructions and burns can lead to scarring alopecia.
- A protectant such as Vaseline should be applied along the hairline and around the ears to prevent damage to the skin. When relaxers come into contact with skin, they can cause irritant or allergic contact dermatitis, which is a type of eczema caused by contact with a particular product. This manifests as an irritable, dry, itchy rash.
- If the relaxer comes with a neutralising shampoo, this must be used.
- Dyeing the hair soon after using a relaxer will cause cumulative damage, as will using excessive heat on the hair. A two-week interval between relaxing and dyeing or thermal straightening is recommended.
- Relaxers strip the hair shaft of proteins and so protein containing products can help to restore the hair and reduce breakage.

## Braids



Braids come in various forms (box braids, knotless braids, cornrows etc). The hair is divided into sections and braided with or without additional extensions in three-strand plaits or two-strand twists. Cornrows (American pronunciation) or canerows (British pronunciation) are braids where the strands are interlocked flat to the scalp in stationary rows.

Braids can be a helpful hairstyle as whilst the hair is in braids, they are protected from manipulation. However, the process of installation is a time when damage can occur if braids are installed too tightly. The edges are particularly susceptible to traction alopecia.

Many children have their hair styled into plaits or cornrows, commonly without additional extensions. Alternatively, a small amount of extra hair is sometimes added to achieve a certain style or to add length.

### Recommendations

- Hair should be braided by an experienced hair stylist, who does not braid the hair too tightly.
- If the scalp is painful after installation, it's probably too tight and will increase the risk of traction alopecia. It should never be necessary to take painkillers after the hair is done.
- Consider leaving the edges out of the braids to avoid putting tension on the delicate hairs there.
- More manipulation = more damage. Braiding the hair soon after a relaxer can increase the risk of breakage.
- Braiding with extensions adds weight to the hair follicle. Long extensions, with the addition of decorative ornaments like beads equals more weight, and therefore a higher risk of damage.
- Braids with larger sections are overall considered to place less stress on the hair and are lower risk but the risk will be increased if heavy extensions are used.
- Whilst the hair is in braids, the scalp should be cleansed with a damp sponge and mild shampoo to reduce scalp build up.
- Braids should not be left in for longer than six weeks.
- Tying braids into tight ponytails or buns increases the risk of damage and should be avoided.



- Ideally, braids should be installed in alternate directions to avoid repeated stress in one direction.

## Wigs, weaves and extensions

Wigs and weaves offer versatile hair styling and can also be protective, as often the natural hair is braided into cornrows or twists and tucked away underneath the wig, protected from manipulation. Exogenous hair can be bought in the form of tracks, which are hairs stitched together onto wefts in a long line. These tracks can be bought in a variety of lengths, colours and textures. A weave is used to describe the style where individual hair tracks are sown onto the braided cornrows, until all the cornrows are covered by the attached hair. Alternatively, the tracks can be attached to the scalp using hair adhesives such as bonding glue. A 'closure' (usually a square piece of lace with hair arranged to create an artificial parting) may be used at the top of the scalp to cover the tracks there, or some of the woman's native hair is left unbraided to comb over the tracks at the top of the scalp.



Wigs may be simply worn over the native hair (either braided into cornrows/twists or left unbraided if short enough) or some women choose to wear a wig cap underneath the wig. Alternatively, the peripheries of the wig can be sewn onto the braided hair underneath or hair adhesives/gels, clips or small combs can be used to secure the wig in place.

Lastly, a variable number of tracks of hair extensions can be added to a woman's natural or relaxed hair to add volume and length. These are often glued or clipped in.

### Recommendations

- It's important to ensure that the hair is being cleansed and moisturised whilst it is under the wig/weave and isn't braided too tightly underneath.
- If the wig or weave is being sewn in, it should not be sewn in too tightly.
- Adhesives used to secure wigs or weave tracks have been associated with irritant or contact dermatitis of the scalp.
- If some of the native hair is left out to cover the tracks of the weave or wig, that hair needs to be taken care of and kept moisturised. It's common for women to use heat to straighten the hair that is left out to match the texture of the weave and this can cause long term damage if done excessively.
- It's important to ensure that the edges are protected from damage caused by the wig itself rubbing on the hairline and causing friction. If a wig cap is worn, one made of satin is less likely to cause frictional damage than cotton or nylon, and satin is less likely to absorb moisture from the hair, reducing the risk of dryness. Furthermore, hair glue and gels used to secure the wig/weave can rip out the delicate hair at the edges when removed.

- Weaves should be removed after eight weeks or sooner.

## Locs



Locs, or dreadlocks are traditionally strands of hair that have been joined and matted into rope-like fibres. They became popular in mainstream media in the 1960s, during the rise of the Rastafari movement but dreadlocks date back centuries and have an important place in cultures and religions all over the world, including India and Ancient Greece.

Contemporarily, “locs” is considered to be the more culturally sensitive term, due to negative connotations with the term “dreadlocks”. Others are not of this viewpoint and may continue to prefer to use the term “dreadlocks” or “dreads”. Locs most commonly are not achieved by just leaving the hair to grow but are carefully sectioned and twisted into locs by professional hairstylists, sometimes known as locicians. There are several different types of locs, including sisterlocs, interlocs and freeform locs.

Some may have religious, social or political motivation for choosing to lock their hair but some may just choose the hairstyle because that’s what they like. Some women may install ‘faux locs’ which are temporary, artificial locs attached to the native hair. It’s important not to make assumptions and for both the patient and clinician to communicate effectively to allow the best management plans to be made.

### Recommendations

- Hair can grow very long in locs and many mistake that as being a measure of healthy hair. This is not necessarily the case, as long locs can become heavy and place tension on the hair strands, increasing the risk of traction alopecia and hair loss. The risk is particularly high with this hairstyle as the locs are usually worn for several years, causing continuous strain on the scalp.
- Excessive tension at the root of the scalp caused by twisting the locs too tightly should be avoided.
- Individuals with locs will need to develop a routine for cleansing their scalp and locs that works for them. For example, people who exercise frequently are likely to need to wash their locs more frequently.
- It’s important for locs to be dried thoroughly after washing, otherwise mould and mildew can build up.

## Natural twists

Twists are a popular hairstyle amongst women with natural hair and are generally regarded as one of the safest maintenance styles.

To achieve this hairstyle, the hair is detangled and divided into sections. Each section is divided into two or three strands and twisted around each other. This is usually done loosely and without hair extensions, placing very little strain on the hair.



### Recommendations

- Hair should be well detangled prior to twisting, otherwise the twists can become matted, leading to hair breakage when they are taken down.
- Natural hair requires frequent moisturisation, which should still be done whilst the hair is in twists.
- It's recommended that twists are redone every four weeks or sooner

### Best practice tips for hair styling

- Taking breaks with protective styles can be beneficial, e.g., take a 6-12 month break from relaxers, twist or braid the hair loosely without extensions or loosely cornrow the hair under a wig.
- The highest risk of traction alopecia, acquired trichorrhhexis nodosa and CCCA, is amongst women who combine hair practices, such as relaxing the hair, straightening it with heat and installing braids, for example.
- Any hair that's already been lost will not grow back overnight and growing your hair will require patience and consistency. In cases of traction alopecia, hair regrowth may start after three months of stopping damaging hair practices but can be permanent.

Hairstyles according to risk of causing traction alopecia (Haskin A, Aguh C, 2016)	
<b>Low risk</b>	Unmanipulated natural hair
	Wigs with hair under a satin wig cap
	Hair tied back loosely
<b>Moderate risk</b>	Loose braids/cornrows/dreadlocks
	Braided natural hair
	Weave installed on natural hair
	Wigs with hair under a cotton or nylon wig cap
	Hair extensions applied to natural hair
<b>High risk</b>	Hair frequently tied back tightly
	Tight braids/cornrows/dreadlocks
	Braided relaxed hair
	Weave installed on relaxed hair
	Hair extensions applied to relaxed hair
Any hairstyle causing symptoms of pain, stinging, crusting, tenting or dimpling	

## Additional services

### Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you on-the-spot advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or the care you have received. You can visit the PALS office between 9.30am and 4.30pm, Monday to Friday in the main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough wings (near the lift foyer).

**Tel:** 020 8725 2453 **Email:** [pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk)

### NHS Choices

NHS Choices provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make decisions about your health. **Web:** [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

### NHS 111

You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones. **Tel:** 111

### AccessAble

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