The 5 Most Common Scalp Problems

A healthy scalp and healthy hair go hand in hand. When your scalp suffers from any of these common problems, it directly impacts your hair—It may not look as full, shiny or soft, or grow as quick or as thick as before.

1. Small white flakes
What it is: Dandruff (also seborrheic dermatitis)

How it affects your hair: "Dandruff is a common condition that can be embarrassing. When it's severe, it can cause hair loss," says New York dermatologist Adesola Dele-Michael, MD (treatments: doctor-prescribed/over-the-counter). Dandruff occurs when the scalp becomes inflamed and causes flare-ups, which naturally lives on the scalp, to shed the top layer of skin leading to flakes.

How to fix it: To treat dandruff, the inflammation and/or overgrowth of yeast needs to be suppressed, says Santa Clara, CA dermatologist Bernard Rashid, MD (treatments: doctor-prescribed). "Nystatin can be used by using prescription strength antifungal creams or pills, or anti-yeast shampoos; shampoo with salicylic acid, sulfur or cortisone cream help control inflammation.

When using over-the-counter dandruff shampoos, it is key to follow and leave on the scalp for five to 10 minutes before rinsing," says Houston dermatologist, Jennifer M. Segal, MD (treatments: doctor-prescribed).

2. Dry, itchy scalp
What it is: A compromised barrier function of the scalp

How it affects your hair: "Chemicals in bleach, dye, keratolysis treatments and hair relaxers can compromise the barrier function of the scalp," says Dr. Dele-Michael. Once the scalp is affected, moisture easily escapes, causing it to become irritated, red and itchy. "If not properly treated, irritation could possibly cause hair thinning."

How to fix it: Celebrity hairstylist DJ (runners of Serge Normant) says to take care of your scalp and limit how often you wash your hair every few days if you can to feed your natural oils build up, which help hydrate it. "Topical steroids can be used to reduce inflammation and restore the scalp's barrier function," says Dr. Dele-Michael.

3. Tingling, itching or burning after color
What it is: An allergy to chemicals in your hair color

How it affects your hair: "Anything that causes a reaction on the scalp can make styling difficult—heat, brushing and products can irritate even more. Hair color can damage the scalp by causing an allergic reaction or by irritating it directly, almost like a chemical burn," says Dr. Segal.

How to fix it: In this situation, staying away from hair color is your best bet. If you can't stop coloring your hair, consult your colorist to ask what options are in the line for you. "Steward R. Loura can add color into the mixture, or formulate a color formula, which helps to neutralize some of the ammonia and minimize irritation. A mild steroid can be prescribed to take down inflammation."

4. A red, scaly scalp with crusty patches
What it is: Psoriasis

How it affects your hair: "Psoriasis can cause thinning and hair loss, it can transform at the hairline and in eyebrows. When this plaque occurs on the scalp, it often leaves a thin, noticeable scar on skin. With psoriasis, the body is signaled to make only too many skin cells too fast, but the difference is that these skin cells are still living, so if you pull them at all, they will blow in the scalp and hair line," says Dr. Rashid.

How to fix it: Psoriasis results in excess cell loss in localized areas, which appears as patches that are hard to disguise. "The best treatments are medications that reduce the cell production system. I like to prescribe corticosteroids, vitamin D creams and Retin-A, since they normalize how much skin cells make," says Dr. Rashid. Make sure to use a milder shampooing shampoo a few times per week, too.

5. A greasy, almost slick coating
What it is: An overly oily scalp

How it affects your hair: "While it is necessary for healthy hair—it keeps the scalp moisturized and gives a layer of defense against infection—too much of it can result in limp, oily or otherwise may not be easily pliable to style."

How to fix it: In Stylist Giselle Lupano of the Salon Setai in Greenwich, CT says that an easy way to combat an oversaturated scalp is producing too much oil is by shampooing regularly. "Always use a gentle shampoo so you don't remove your scalp to a harsher cleanser. If regular washing doesn't cut it, talk to your doctor and get tested to see if a hormone imbalance could be the cause."

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- 11 Scalp Savers (available at 149.95/100-scoop savers)
- Surprising Causes of Scalp Problems (forbes.com/2015/08/14/scalp-problems)
- Is Your Daily Routine Ruining Your Hair? (allaroundbeauty.com/2014/10/your-daily-routine-ravaging-your-hair)
- A Surprising Way to Stop Scalp Itchiness Caused by Hair Dye (beautyology.com/2016/surprising-way-to-stop-scalp-itchiness-caused-by-hair-dye)

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