

Columnists

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EcoConsumer

Risks seen in some hair products

Today we'll highlight "green" and healthy hair care, from the perils of potentially toxic products to the best disposal options for hair.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

We spend a lot of time obsessing about good hair and bad hair. But when we get beyond the mirror, it becomes clear that the ingredients in hair products deserve our attention as well.

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Q: You're not going to tell me my hair products are killing me, are you?

A: No. Sensationalism doesn't help, and disagreement exists about possible hazards. But research indicates that a number of chemicals in hair products may have damaging effects on our health and the environment. Ingredients in hair products and other cosmetics are subject to minimal regulations in the U.S., so we shouldn't assume all products are safe.

Q: Since hair products contain thousands of different ingredients, many unpronounceable, how can we possibly keep track of which products are safest?

A: We can't, although we should educate ourselves enough to avoid the most questionable products. Many environmental advocates believe the solution lies in proposed federal legislation that would set stricter standards and make it easier for consumers to know what's in their cosmetics. The cosmetics industry fiercely opposes such regulations, calling them costly and unnecessary.

Q: So which hair products pose the greatest risks?

A: Hair straighteners and relaxers top the sketchiness list. The hair-straightening treatment Brazilian Blowout has been under scrutiny since Portland hair stylists reported various medical problems after using it. As a result, in September 2010 the Oregon-based Center for Research on Occupational and Environmental Toxicology began issuing warnings about Brazilian Blowout, which is offered at dozens of salons in the Seattle area.

Brazilian Blowout (in its original formulations) and similar treatments release the carcinogen formaldehyde as a gas. The national nonprofit Environmental Working Group (EWG) provides more information about hazards from hair straighteners at seati.ms/s7fhWC.

Hair relaxers, related products marketed heavily to African-American women, are dangerous because they may contain powerful chemicals such as lye, a toxic substance also used in drain cleaners.

Q: What's the safest way to straighten hair?

A: EWG evaluated 10 methods (seati.ms/tgPbQg) and found that using a hot flat iron is safest, though you still need to take care to avoid burns from the iron.

Q: How about perms?

A: A permanent wave, or perm, creates curls by using strong chemicals in ways similar to hair straighteners, breaking and then reforming the bonds in hair. When getting a perm or any chemical hair treatment, ask your stylist to use the safest products and techniques available.

Q: What are other potential problem hair products?

A: Consumer Reports recommends avoiding several types of chemicals in shampoos, hair dyes and other hair products, including parabens, phthalates and coal tars. See seati.ms/va7kZ5 for more information.

Q: Finally, what's the best way to dispose of hair?

A: Putting hair in the garbage is fine. If you want to compost human or pet hair in your backyard compost bin, feel free, but it doesn't break down quickly.

Don't put hair in your yard-waste collection cart. Cedar Grove Composting, the Seattle-area processor of that material, wants only yard waste, food scraps and food-soiled paper in that cart, to help ensure quality control over the final product.

If you cut off hair 10 inches or longer, consider sending it to a charitable program such as LocksofLove.org. It uses donated hair for children's hairpieces.

After the Gulf Coast's BP oil spill in 2010, more than 750,000 pounds of hair were collected nationwide to make "oil booms" to soak up the oil, but only about 15 percent of that hair ended up getting used. Don't spend your time and postage sending hair clippings to those types of projects unless they have documented support and funding.

Hair today, gone tomorrow! But that's not necessarily true for all the products we use on our hair. Chemicals can linger, and using fewer and safer chemicals is the best way to truly achieve "good hair."

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