African American
HAIR CARE & EXERCISE

HOW TO ACHIEVE A HEALTHY BODY,
HEALTHY HAIR AND HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

USU CENTER FOR
HEALTH DISPARITIES
Building Partnerships for Better Health
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African American Hair and Health Behaviors

Recent studies indicate that African American women have a routine hair care schedule at the salon, but do not have a routine schedule for health care. While a trip to the salon may be a relaxing getaway from daily stressors and a convenient way to maintain healthy hair, spending time on maintaining a healthy body and mind are important as well.

Exercise is a great way to keep your body fit and functional, but hair care often deters African American women from participating in physical activity. After spending sometimes several hours at the salon or at home creating the perfect hairstyle, understandably, participating in physical activity or exercise can be undesirable.

This booklet will explain:

- why hair care can be time consuming in the African American community
- common concerns of exercising and seeking health care
- ways to care for your hair in and out of the gym
- different methods of exercising.
The Science Behind African American Hair

Several differences exist between African American hair and Caucasian hair relating to texture and maintenance.

What contributes to those differences?

When looking under a microscope, the hair shafts look completely different:

- African American hair resembles a twisted, oval rod.\(^3\)
- Caucasian hair resembles a smooth cylinder.\(^3\)

Because a coiled hair shaft:

- Maintenance can be difficult.
- Hair is more prone to breakage.
- Hair is more likely to tangle.
- Grooming can be time consuming.

Did you know?

African American hair is easier to comb while wet; but it still takes five times more work to comb through than Caucasian hair while wet.\(^3\)
Why Is Hair Care an Obstacle for Exercising?

The beauty standards of today’s society favor long, straight hair; which is typically associated with Caucasian women. Most African American women have a natural texture of tightly curled, coarse hair. Modern society, especially in job settings, still views natural African American hair as untraditional or radical and often prefers a more conservative look which requires chemical or heat straightening.

Chemical straightening, although effective, is time consuming and damaging to the hair shaft because the decomposition of molecules that cause the hair to coil. In addition, as the natural hair continues to grow, weak points in the shaft develop due to the clash of the two different textures, leading to breakage. An alternative to chemical straightening is heat straightening or “pressing.” Hair pressing is also time consuming, as well as damaging due to the intense heat. After hours striving for the perfect hairstyle, it is understandable that women would not want to ruin it by spending hours at the gym. Because sweat and humidity, hair often becomes wet and frizzy after a fitness workout, making it harder to detangle and more fragile.
Healthy Hair and Healthy Body: Exercise Regularly!

Hair care may be an obstacle for physical activity, but exercising can actually help your hair grow. Chronically elevated levels of cortisol, a neuro-chemical associated with stress, can cause detrimental effects to your body, such as weakening the immune system and provoking hair loss. Exercise is an effective way to reduce stress by lowering cortisol levels, boost the immune system and promote hair growth. In addition to reducing stress, exercise lowers the risk for developing cardiovascular (heart) disease. According to the American Heart Association, among non-Hispanic African Americans aged 20 years and older, about 45 percent of men and 47 percent of women have some form of cardiovascular disease. Individuals, especially in the African American community where heart disease is prevalent, should make an extra effort to include exercise in their daily routines. Small changes, such as walking an extra 10 minutes per day, can lead to noticeable differences in heart health.
Exercising Behaviors Survey

Read the questions below and write a few notes about your behavior.

1. How many times do you exercise in a week?

2. What are your reasons for not exercising?

3. How do you maintain your hair when you exercise? And what do you do after you exercise?

4. How often do you see your hairdresser? How much does it cost?

5. What do you value more: health or hair?

When reviewing this survey, it is important to evaluate whether you are devoting more time and effort to healthy behaviors or hair care. While hair care is important, try to develop new habits that will allow you to be more physically active.

Remember, the beneficial effects of exercise impact all domains of your body—including your hair!
Hair Maintenance
Tips for Exercising

Use protective styles to maintain your relaxed hair:

- Chignons or buns
- French braids
- Tucked in ponytail
- Low ponytail covered by a satin scarf
- Cornrows
- Braids
- Wigs

Natural styles are a healthier approach to hair care because they avoid the use of harsh chemicals that are often found in relaxers. Here are a few ways to wear your hair that are easy to style and maintain during exercise:

- Afro
- Twists
- Locks
- Bantu knots
- Simple updo
- Wash and go
- Scrunches
- Finger curls

Remember…

Try not to worry about the social barriers of natural styles. Wear them with pride and CONFIDENCE!
Exercise Tips

Climb Stairs!

A great aerobic exercise is walking up and down the stairs. Start with a warm-up by walking up one stair, and stepping down one stair. Repeat this motion for about two minutes or until you feel that your body has warmed up sufficiently. When you are ready, start by walking up one stair, and stepping down again, and then walk up two stairs, and step down two stairs. Continue with three steps, then four steps, and keep going until you have completed the whole flight of stairs.

Get Into the Groove!

Try incorporating some dancing into your daily routine. That’s right, crank up the music and go for it! Many exercise classes have been developed from dance: Jazzercise, Zumba (based on salsa and meringue dancing) and hip-hop aerobics—but the original concept works just as well because you are using so much energy. Include your family, too, so they can enjoy the fun and exercise.

Strengthen Your Core!

Crunches are a classic exercise to include in a well-rounded fitness plan to improve your body’s core strength—leading to better balance and stability.

The proper way to do crunches is to lie on the floor with your knees bent toward the ceiling, place your hands behind your head or lay them across your chest, and carefully lift your shoulders off the ground, slightly curling your back. Your torso should not fully lift off the ground. Then, bring your shoulders back to the ground and repeat. Be sure to keep your head and neck straight during the exercise. It is tempting to pull on them to help raise your shoulders, but doing so can cause injury.
Along with exercise, healthy eating habits can lead to healthy hair. Certain vitamins and minerals contribute to stronger fuller, and longer hair. Here is a list of nutrients that help keep your hair healthy along with good sources of each:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nutrient</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biotin</td>
<td>Strengthens the hair shaft and encourages growth</td>
<td>Milk, Eggs, Almonds, Walnuts, Cauliflower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calcium</td>
<td>Promotes shine and strengthens the hair shaft</td>
<td>Yogurt, Milk, Cheese, Shellfish, Spinach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitamin A</td>
<td>Helps produce sebum, a natural oily substance that conditions the scalp</td>
<td>Eggs, Carrots, Leafy Greens, Cantaloupe, Sweet Potatoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>Increases blood circulation to the scalp</td>
<td>Beans, Kale, Collard Greens, Beef, Lamb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omega-3 fatty acids</td>
<td>Promotes shine</td>
<td>Salmon, Tuna, Walnuts, Flax, Pumpkin Seeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zinc</td>
<td>Prevents hair loss</td>
<td>Beef, Pork, Nuts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Resources


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