

IN THIS ISSUE

Complications & Difficult Cases: The Weight of a Scar

AMA House of Delegates Approves Resolutions with Far-Reaching Impact on U.S. Healthcare

How to Put Your Patients on a “Hair Diet”

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ABSTRACT

The integrity of hair is determined by the intricate building blocks of the many layers of the hair follicle, but it also relies on proper nutrition. Weak hair can result from external factors such as physical trauma, heat manipulation, and chemicals, as well as internal factors such as inadequate nutrition. A “hair diet” addresses both internal and external factors that lead to fragile or damaged hair and provides the basis for a conversation with patients to improve the health of their hair.

Keywords: chemical processing, ethnic hair styling, hair anatomy, hair dye and bleach, hair structure, heat damage to hair, nutrition for hair

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INTRODUCTION

As hair restoration experts, we see patients with hair loss primarily due to genetics, yet some of our patients also suffer from thinning due to external causes—the damage they inflict upon themselves. Although genetics determines an individual’s hair color, texture, and density, grooming techniques allow a person to express their personal style. Unfortunately, many of these grooming techniques can be damaging or lead to scarring.

This article reviews the anatomical structure and chemical composition of hair and how it relates to damage caused by certain grooming practices. This is especially important when it comes to understanding cultural or ethnic variations where traumatic grooming practices are common. With a better scientific understanding of hair follicle structure and growth, the physician can more effectively counsel patients on hair care regimens and implement treatment strategies that minimize damage and promote hair health and growth.

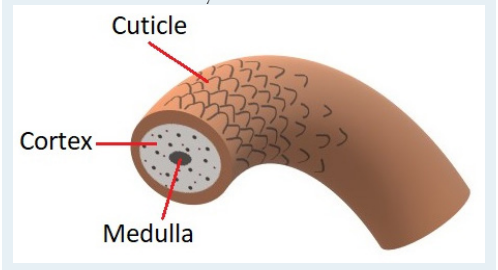
For this purpose, we introduce the concept of a “hair diet.” Much like a weight control diet, which emphasizes limiting consumption of “bad” foods and increasing intake of “healthy” ones, the hair diet guides patients to limit the use of styling practices that can damage or weaken the chemical and physical properties of hair, and it teaches them how to fortify the hair with the building blocks—both products and nutrition—that are required for hair synthesis and growth.

PHYSICAL AND CHEMICAL ANATOMY OF THE HAIR

Hair exists in three stages: anagen, catagen, and telogen. The anagen phase refers to the stage at which hair actively grows, and it accounts for 90% of the life cycle of a scalp hair follicle. During this phase, hair grows approximately one centimeter per month, although this rate may be slower in people of African descent. Subsequently, a hair follicle enters the catagen or involution phase, which is a short transitional phase. About 8% of our hairs are in the telogen phase, the final stage, and it is used to denote a resting period where the hair follicle is no longer actively growing. After the conclusion of this phase, a hair strand is shed, and the cycle begins once again.

The hair follicle consists of several concentric compartments. Each individual hair consists of an external segment that is visible to the naked eye and a deeper portion embedded within the dermal and adipose layers of the skin. The former is referred to as the hair shaft, while the latter is called the hair follicle or hair root. As shown in Figure 1, each hair shaft has three layers: inner (medulla),

FIGURE 1. The three layers of the hair shaft



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31ST WORLD CONGRESS
NOVEMBER 1-4, 2023



TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 121 How to Put Your Patients on a "Hair Diet"
- 123 President's Message
- 124 Co-Editors' Message
- 125 Notes from the Editor Emeritus: Dr. Dow B. Stough
- 129 Controversies: Ethics and the Fully Informed Patient
- 130 Complications & Difficult Cases: The Weight of a Scar
- 133 AMA House of Delegates Approves Resolutions with Far-Reaching Impact on U.S. Healthcare
- 134 The Notable Articles Project
- 139 Message from the ISHRS 2023 World Congress Program Chair
- 140 Literature Review: Trichoscopy for the Hair Restoration Surgeon: What We Should Know
- 142 Letter to the Editors
- 144 In Loving Memory of Prof. Tamaz Tamazashvili
- 145 Hear from the Assistants: Ms. Mariola Reszke
- 146 ABHRS President's Corner
- 151 Classified Ads
- 153 Calendar of Events

HAIR TRANSPLANT FORUM INTERNATIONAL

is published bi-monthly by the
International Society of Hair Restoration Surgery

First-class postage paid Milwaukee, WI and
additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER Send address changes to:

Hair Transplant Forum International
International Society of Hair Restoration Surgery
1932 S. Halsted St., Suite 413
Chicago, IL 60608 USA
Telephone 1-630-262-5399
U.S. Domestic Toll Free 1-800-444-2737
Fax 1-630-262-1520

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1932 S. Halsted St., Suite 413
Chicago, IL 60608 USA

Printed in the USA.



Official Publication of the
International Society of Hair Restoration Surgery