

# Haircare and eczema

By Julie Van Onselen, Dermatology Nurse Adviser to the National Eczema Society.



Our hair is often said to be our 'crowning glory' and people with eczema can find it very frustrating not to be able to use everyday haircare products. We know that shampoos, conditioners and hairstyling can make eczema worse, especially on our scalp, face and neck. These products can also trigger hand eczema and be a cause of contact dermatitis. If eczema is severe, temporary hair loss may happen, which can be a devastating consequence of scalp eczema. In this article we explore how haircare may affect eczema and give tips on how to minimise irritation and be more aware of possible allergic triggers (contact dermatitis).

## Hair washing and conditioning

### Shampoos

Washing hair can be problematic if you have eczema. Even if you don't have eczema on your scalp, shampoo can irritate the eczema on your hands or body. If this is the case, then try using a hand-held shower head to wash your hair over the washbasin or bath.

The vast majority of cosmetic shampoos contain sodium lauryl sulfate (SLS), which is a harsh detergent. SLS is designed to remove grease with a soapy lather. Shampoos without SLS tend not to lather but still clean the hair. As a general rule everyone with eczema should avoid SLS, which is a universal eczema irritant.

There are other irritants in cosmetic shampoos, so look at the ingredients list before purchasing. It's best to avoid the following known irritants to eczema found in many popular shampoos:

- Avoid fragranced or scented products, including essential oils.
- Avoid olive oil, which damages the skin barrier.
- Avoid tree nut oils (for example, almond, argan and macadamia), especially for babies or toddlers, as there is evidence that atopic eczema can lead to the development of food allergy. Tree nuts are among the most common food allergens. However, the risk of allergic reaction is small as ingredients derived from nuts have been highly refined.
- Avoid a preservative called methylisothiazolinone (also known as MI, limonene and linalool). This preservative is known to cause contact dermatitis.

Sometimes the full ingredients are not included on the product labelling or packaging. If this is the case, you will need to contact the manufacturer's careline – a phone number or other contact details should be on

the label or company's website. Be aware that baby shampoos may contain irritant ingredients, even though they may be marketed as 'gentle' products for babies. If you cannot find a shampoo to suit you or every shampoo irritates your eczema, you can wash your hair with medical emollients. Lotion forms are advised as they mix well with water, but they may leave your hair slightly greasy.

If you have hand eczema, you should always wear PVC gloves with a cotton lining to wash your hair. Ingredients in shampoo often irritate hand eczema and may be the cause of contact dermatitis. A contact allergy to shampoo would need to be diagnosed through patch testing, which can be arranged through a dermatologist.

## Medicated shampoos

Choosing the right shampoo is even more important if you have scalp eczema, as most cosmetic shampoos will irritate your scalp. It's likely therefore that you will need a medicated shampoo, which can be bought from the chemist or prescribed. There is a range of medicated shampoos available – tar shampoos for scaly, flaky scalps (for example, Capasal Therapeutic Shampoo and T/Gel shampoos), and also Dermax Therapeutic Shampoo.



## Types of scalp eczema

**Atopic eczema** affects any part of the body, including the scalp. A severely inflamed (red and sore) scalp may result in hair loss that is temporary, and hair will grow back when eczema settles.

Discoid eczema affects any part of the body. In the scalp it will look like round, scaly areas that are very itchy. It is likely that there will also be discoid patches on the body.

**Seborrhoeic eczema** (seborrhoeic dermatitis) affects the oilier parts of the body, so is very common on the scalp and face, including the hairline. It causes redness and yellow scales. Seborrhoeic dermatitis is a reaction to yeasts so, in this type of scalp eczema, treatment should include 'anti-yeast' shampoos and creams. Sometimes this type of eczema is confused or even mixed with psoriasis, described as 'sebo-psoriasis'.

In babies, seborrhoeic dermatitis is often called 'cradle cap'. This is due to immature oil glands that overproduce and lots of greasy yellow scales are seen on the scalp. By the age of 6 months, cradle cap has generally disappeared.

**Irritant dermatitis** is caused by anything that comes into frequent contact with the skin. As explored in this article, many haircare products are likely to irritate eczematous skin.

**Contact allergic dermatitis** is caused by an allergy to a specific substance, and hair colourant is a big culprit.



If you have seborrhoeic dermatitis, you should be recommended or prescribed an 'anti-yeast' shampoo (for example, Dandrazol, Nizoral or Selsun). Some emollient companies also manufacture shampoos for eczema and dry scalps that are fragrance-free (for example, E45 Dry Scalp Shampoo, Eucerin DermoCapillaire shampoo and Oilatum Anti-Dandruff Shampoo. If you have infected scalp eczema, Dermol 500 Lotion can be used as a shampoo. It contains an antibacterial agent that may help in reducing the bacterial count on your skin and in preventing reinfection.

## Conditioners

Conditioners are more problematic as they are made to stick to hair and keep it smooth and shiny. As they don't wash out during rinsing, they are more likely to irritate scalp eczema. One alternative to cosmetic hair conditioners is to use diluted cider vinegar for shine. If your hair is prone to tangles or knots, another suggestion is to spray mineral oil diluted in warm water. A special detangling comb can be very helpful, as it will get through hair that is not conditioned and prevent knotting.

## Hairstyling products

These include hair gels, hairsprays, setting lotions and products to help hair shine and to reduce frizz. As with shampoos, avoid products with ingredients that are known to irritate eczema and try to find styling products that suit you. However, they are all likely to irritate to some extent, especially if scalp eczema is flaring, and in rare cases they may cause allergic dermatitis. If scalp eczema is problematic, it's a good idea to keep haircare simple (using only a shampoo that suits or an emollient for hair washing) and try to stop or reduce the number of products used. You could then re-introduce hairstyling products individually, to try to work out what may be causing the irritation.

Keep hairdryers on a warm setting as a hot setting will dry your scalp, causing itching and irritating your eczema.

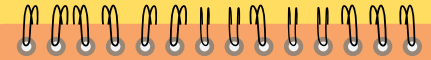
## Hair colouring and bleaching

Hair colourant is a common, known sensitiser for people with eczema, especially permanent hair colourants containing an ingredient called paraphenylenediamine (known as PPD). This should always be avoided. Semi-permanent hair colourants or tints generally do not contain PPD.

If you colour your hair at home with these products, be sure to check the ingredients list. PPD is often associated with henna but is only present in black henna, which is used for tattooing. The henna used in hair colouring is orange-red henna.

Unfortunately, there are no hair colourants specially recommended for people with eczema. So, when you are looking to either buy hair colourant product to use at home or have your hair coloured at the hairdresser, it's a good idea to make sure the hair colourant does not contain PPD. An experienced colourant technician will be able to colour your hair without touching your scalp – low lights and highlights are put on in packages, so the colour does not touch the scalp.

It is important to talk to your colour technician at your hairdresser, who will give you guidance and recommendations for suitable hair colourants to use. The hairdresser should always do a skin test before colouring your hair – this is a patch of the colourant placed behind your ear and is put in place by the hairdresser. You need to remove it after 48 hours and observe this area. If the skin underneath the small patch is red and raised, this indicates sensitivity to that particular hair colourant. You may have seen a dermatologist and had patch testing to a



## Tips for choosing a hairdresser /colour technician

- \* Ask if they have **knowledge of eczema** and understand the issues with scalp eczema and haircare.
- \* Make sure that they have an **experienced colour technician** (a hairdresser who specialises in hair colourant).
- \* Do they offer you a **patch test**? (You should never have your hair coloured without a patch test).
- \* Can the technician colour your hair with **no-touch** or **minimal touch** to the scalp?
- \* Do they have a choice of **products for sensitive scalps**, including SLS-free shampoos?
- \* Can **hairdryers be set to warm** and can the hairdresser allow **extra time** in your appointment for hairstyling if needed?



range of possible skin allergens, which may have included a hairdressing battery. If you have had this kind of patch testing, you will know the exact hair colourant ingredients you are allergic to, so take your list and check with your hairdresser.

If you are using a hair colourant at home, you should still proceed with caution and do your own patch test, either behind your ear or put on the inside of your arm, for 48 hours. You could use a cotton bud to dab a little colourant on your skin, and cover with non-allergenic tape. The principle is exactly the same as the hairdresser patch test, described above. If your skin does not react, you should be okay with the hair colourant on your scalp. However, if this small area of skin becomes red and itchy, do not use it. It could cause a nasty reaction – severe allergic contact dermatitis – when a larger amount of hair colourant is applied on your scalp. Remember that if you colour your hair yourself, you won't be able to avoid touching your scalp. Sometimes an allergic contact dermatitis can be quite dramatic and cause redness and swelling of your entire face too. It can cause your eyelids to swell, making it difficult to open your eyes, and this swelling can last several days until treatment takes effect. This can be a frightening experience and may also upset your eczema generally. This is why it's always best to be cautious, so make sure that you check the hair colourant ingredients to avoid known allergens and do a self-patch test.

Hair bleach removes natural synthetic pigment. Allergy to hair bleach is possible and people with eczema are more likely to be irritated by bleach, especially as there will be direct contact with a sensitive scalp. Hairdressers should not use bleach on sensitive scalps or if the client has eczema.

## Perming and straightening

Generally, people with eczema would be advised not to get their hair permed, as all perm solutions usually irritate. However, some people with eczema may be able to tolerate acid perms – they are slightly less irritant than alkaline perms, which should be avoided by people with eczema.

Heated straighteners and curling tongs are usually very hot, and the heat is likely to irritate eczema, causing itching and drying. You need to be very careful as a scalp burn, as well as being very painful, could damage the skin barrier and cause an eczema flare.

There are a number of chemical hair-straightening products (called relaxers), which are used by people with tight curls. A relaxer is a lotion, cream or pomade – it works by breaking down the chemical bonds of the hair shaft, disrupting the shape and reconstructing the hair bonds. A relaxer has to be applied at the lowest point of the hair, so on the scalp.

Some people may be allergic to the chemicals in relaxers and some may get scalp burns from using these products. A scalp base protectant cream can be used to prevent burning, although this could also cause irritation. Due to the potentially irritating nature of relaxers, they are perhaps not suitable for people with scalp eczema, or only to be used with great care.

## Hair loss and eczema

Eczema can result in patchy hair loss, due to eczema flares and inflammation on the scalp. Hair loss in eczema includes thinning, poor hair quality and bald patches. This hair loss is usually reversible. You can help prevent further hair loss through eczema by drying hair naturally or with a hairdryer on a cool setting – this will also keep the scalp cool and reduce itch.

Hair loss in eczema can also be caused by braiding/weaving causing trauma to hair follicles and hair shaft abnormalities. If you have scalp eczema, loose hairstyles would be more helpful to prevent additional traction injury in a sensitive scalp. Trichotillomania can sometimes develop in eczema – this is an irresistible urge to pull out hair. It usually occurs in children and young people and is not related to eczema, but constant scratching of an itchy scalp may lead to hair pulling. Trichotillomania is a psychological condition and cognitive behavioural therapy or habit reversal are the recommended treatments.



## In summary

This article aims to offer practical advice for anyone with eczema, especially scalp eczema, on haircare.

Finding the right haircare routines, products and styles for you is key to managing your eczema.

A good hairdresser, and especially an experienced colour technician, is very important to prevent irritation or allergy from hair colourants.

If your scalp eczema suddenly erupts with swelling after using a new haircare product, we advise you to always seek immediate medical attention.