



Kinks, Curls, and Coils, Oh My!

A guide to hair typing and texture-based hair care

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Natural styling has been popularized over the last few years as many women with curly and kinky hair have transitioned from using relaxers to chemically straighten their hair to wearing their hair in its natural state. This may be due to a desire to have healthier hair, as chemical relaxers often damage the integrity of one's hair leading to breakage, especially for those with alopecia or other hair and scalp disorders. Some make the switch simply to embrace their natural tresses and as a display of their cultural and ethnic identity.

Regardless of intention, there is a growing interest in understanding how to best care for one's natural hair. Many turn to the online natural hair community for tips. The "natural hair community" is an online space where individuals with curly, kinky, or textured hair can share tips for styling and caring for their hair. Many members of the community use the "Andre Walker hair typing system" to categorize different hair textures and curl patterns. The number (1-4) corresponds to the general texture of the hair, with 1 designating straight hair, 2 for wavy, 3 for curly, and 4 for kinky hair types. The proceeding letter then further designates the curl pattern. For example, 4a hair is described as coily, 4b hair is "Z" shaped and 4c hair is very tightly coiled. It is a common practice in the natural hair community to seek advice on product choice and styling options from people with the same hair type. While it is true that hair texture and curl pattern play a role in the way hair responds to styling, the hair typing system should not be the end all be all. This hair typing system is not scientifically proven and does not consider how well one's hair absorbs and retains moisture or the density of one's hair. However, there are differences that should be taken into consideration when styling curly and kinky hair in general.

Current literature has shown that Black hair is the most fragile. This is in part due to structural and chemical differences such as a more elliptical hair shaft, increased space between hair cuticles, and decreased water content in hair follicles as compared to Asian or Caucasian hair. Additionally, the areas of the hair that kink and curl are areas that concentrate stress, which can lead to breakage over time. Thus, the more kinks and curls in the hair, the more vulnerable one's hair is to stress and breakage. Therefore, those with hair at the kinkier and curlier end of the spectrum must be strategic about the way they care for their hair. Keeping the hair moisturized with rinse out conditioners, leave in conditioners, creams, and pomades that contain water can improve hair elasticity and thus reduce breakage manipulation from styling. Oils seal in this moisture which helps it stay moisturized for longer. Chemical relaxers should be avoided as they break down the bonds in the hair strand that keep it strong. If chemical relaxers are used, the

time between treatment should be spaced out as much as possible. In addition, protein treatments can be used to strengthen the hair and smooth the cuticle. Shampoos with gentle detergents are preferable to harsh shampoos that strip the hair of moisture leaving it brittle and dry. Perhaps the most important styling consideration is to reduce mechanical stress on the hair by keeping hair manipulation to a minimum and avoiding styling that places too much tension on the hair strands such as tight braids, weaves, wigs, or cornrows. If these styles are done, they should be installed in a manner that is not too tight or painful. It is also important to take breaks in between wearing these styles. It is important to keep in mind that the curlier or kinkier the hair, the more manipulation, such as brushing, or combing will be needed to achieve a more sleek or flat look. This can be avoided by keeping the hair in one style for a while before restyling and using tools such as small-toothed combs and brushes with hard bristles sparingly. One should also be gentle and patient while styling their hair to avoid breakage.

In conclusion, although hair typing systems can be helpful, they have their limitations. While they can help describe the general appearance of the hair, they do not reveal much about the chemical and structural properties that can only be seen under a microscope. Rather than looking to strict hair rules based on hair typing, those with natural hair, especially those with tightly curled and coiled textures should remember 3 general principles:

- Keep the hair moisturized with conditioners, butters, creams, and gentle shampoos.
- Try adding protein treatments to your hair care routine to increase hair strength.
- Avoid styling practices that place too much mechanical stress on the hair.

Those with kinkier hair are the most vulnerable to breakage and should be especially mindful of these principles and be sure to give their hair extra tender, love and care.

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