

7 Easy Ways To Moisturize A Dry Scalp From Derms & Hairstylists



mbg Beauty and Lifestyle Senior Editor
By Alexandra Engler ⓘ



If you've ever dealt with a dry scalp—and since you're here, there's a decent chance—you likely experienced one or more of these symptoms: tight skin, itchiness, flakes, ashiness, or redness. No, a dry scalp is no small annoyance. And while the face and body tend to get most of our skin care attention, the scalp's skin woes should be attended to with the same diligence.

So now you may also be wondering how best to treat it. With your face or body, the solution tends to be a bit simpler: Slather on a nurturing lotion and do so consistently. With your scalp you don't have that solution, as for most people, you have hair in the way.

So what's a dry scalp sufferer to do? You have options, several, in fact. Here, the best tips to relieve dry scalps:

1. Apply scalp-specific oils.

There's an oil for everything. You have your face oils, usually formulated to nurture skin without clogging pores or irritating the delicate skin. You have body oils, which tend to be a bit thicker and able to cover a larger surface area. You have hair oils, which help trap in moisture and add shine.

For scalp oils, there are a few avenues to take based on your additional needs. If your dry scalp comes with flakes, you may consider using one with a clarifying, yet gentle, tea tree oil to help lift off the dead skin cells—while soothing inflammation. If you want to encourage growth as an added bonus, consider rosemary (or any of these essential oils).

But for an all-around safe bet, jojoba oil is thin, fast-absorbing, isn't comedogenic, and isn't as prone to buildup. "Jojoba makes an excellent moisturizer for dryness since the active components of jojoba oil mimic the body's natural oils due to its waxy nature," notes naturopathic doctor Tess Marshall, N.D. "The oil is made up of mostly fatty acids and wax esters. This includes helping dry or flaky skin on the scalp for conditions such as dandruff and seborrheic dermatitis."

2. Try a hydrating hair & skin supplement.

Just like the rest of your skin, you can hydrate internally. You have a few avenues available via supplementation. First up: Collagen supplements are made of amino acid peptides, which are able to be absorbed by the body where they aid in various functions.* For the skin and hair, they help in two ways. First amino acids are the building blocks of keratin, or what makes up your hair, so collagen supplements can provide those precious nutrients to your strands.* Second, they can also support a healthy scalp by promoting your body's natural collagen and elastin production.*

For a hydration boost, hyaluronic acid is another one to look into. Hyaluronic acid is found naturally in the body and helps your skin naturally pull in and retain water. You can supplement the nutrient, to help keep your skin hydrated. *

Most experts also recommend vitamin E for the scalp.* Vitamin E is "full of nutrients and is one of the best vitamins for the scalp," says trichologist Shab Reslan.* Vitamin E is believed to work by calming inflammation on your skin and scalp, slowing free radical damage around your hair follicles that can lead to premature graying and hair damage.*

Biotin is another popular hair supplement, as the B vitamin aids in the keratin-making process if you want healthy, strong strands alongside a hydrated scalp (let's be honest, who doesn't?).*

3. Remove buildup.

If you have buildup at your scalp, it doesn't matter if you are using the best scalp mask or oil out there—that film of product, excess dead skin cells, sebum, and dirt is going to keep it from penetrating your dehydrated skin cells. (It's the same reason most people are encouraged to exfoliate their faces and bodies one to three times a week.) But it's not only that: Buildup can actually lead to inflammation and even increased hair shedding. "When you have product, dirt, and oil building up around your follicle opening—which is where your hair grows out of—buildup around that starts to slowly suffocate your hair root, and it causes inflammation," Reslan once told us about the condition.

To remove buildup, just reach for a scalp exfoliator. Much like the rest of your body, exfoliators come in two kinds: chemical (with AHAs or BHAs) or physical (with granular materials). No matter which type you choose (here

are some for your browsing pleasure), you'd apply them in sections pre-shampoo, massaging them into the skin and rinsing out thoroughly under the spray.

4. Use a sulfate-free shampoo

Sulfates are cleansing agents often found in shampoos—in fact, they're the actives that give shampoos that lather. However, they are very drying to both the strand and scalp. (They are highly stripping of your scalp's natural oils, which can disrupt the delicate scalp microbiome as well as trigger skin conditions like dermatitis, and can contribute to frizz, physical damage, and fading of hair dye.) That's why so many make the switch to sulfate-free shampoos, which use gentler surfactants in their place so you're still cleansing your hair without irritation or potential damage.

Here are our favorite sulfate-free options, if you're looking for recommendations.

5. Try a scalp mask.

Just as you might apply a hydrating mask to your face, you can also do so on your scalp. (Seeing a trend here? All the things you regularly do for your face you can also do for your scalp.) Scalp masks should be used as a pre-shampoo treatment and applied directly to the skin and root. It may take some work getting it on the scalp itself—especially for those with dense or curly hair—so try to work it in through sections. Once you've covered the skin sufficiently, you can wrap your hair with a shower cap to keep the goop from dripping. Let it sit for anywhere from 10 to 30 minutes. Then take your shower as normal.

Luckily, scalp masks are super easy to DIY—usually with one ingredient. Here, some of our favorites.

1. Aloe vera: The juice from this plant contains plenty of water, minerals, and vitamins—making it moisturizing and anti-inflammatory, "so it may benefit those with scalp inflammation and irritation," says **Gary Goldenberg, M.D.**, assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York. You can check out our DIY hair mask guide here.
2. Coconut oil: This popular kitchen staple is often used in beauty rituals, from the body to the hair. "At the root, a coconut oil product will help moisturize the scalp while promoting healthy hair growth," says hairstylist Miko Branch, co-founder of natural hair care brand Miss Jessie's.
3. Honey: Manuka honey has been shown to have many cosmetic benefits. When used as a mask, Manuka honey can act as an anti-inflammatory for the scalp, reducing redness and irritation. And it also has humectant properties (i.e., its ability to attract water to the surface of the skin and hair as well as deliver hydration to the deeper layers), so applying Manuka honey topically can also help your hair and scalp retain moisture. Learn more about making your own mask here.
4. Avocado: Avocado and avocado oil have plenty of benefits for the scalp. "The antioxidants and high levels of linoleic acid help support the integrity of the skin barrier, improving skin hydration, decreasing inflammation, and maintaining the balance of the skin microbiome, which is helpful for conditions like dry, flaking, and irritated skin as seen in people with atopic dermatitis or seborrheic dermatitis," says board-certified dermatologist Keira Barr, M.D.

6. Skip the dry shampoo and other styling products

Many styling products, notably dry shampoo, are very dehydrating for your scalp. Many styling products contain oil-absorbing ingredients, which keep your style looking fresh and give your roots lift but can be irritating in the long run. (Not only can they disrupt your natural sebum production, but they can also cause buildup—for which we'll refer you back to the previous point.)

And if you just can't imagine your hair routine without your favorite products, just be mindful of the ingredients in them. Opt for natural-leaning options that can aid in hair and skin health through soothing botanical extracts—and do your best to keep styling products on the hair rather than the skin. Also try your best to steer clear of silicones, which create an occlusive barrier around the strands and scalp that tends to be very difficult to remove in the wash, so your hydrating products aren't able to get past them and do their jobs.

7. Give yourself a scalp massage

"Beautiful, strong hair depends on good blood circulation, proper nutrition, and a healthy and supple scalp," says board-certified dermatologist Raechele Cochran Gathers, M.D., who specializes in hair care and founded MDHairMixtress, tells us about scalp massages. One of the most effective ways to get your circulation going is through massage (not to mention easy and cheap!).

"Use your finger pads (not nails) to apply medium-firm pressure to your scalp, in a circular motion," says Cochran Gathers. And honestly, you can keep it as simple as that, no fuss. Or you can definitely put a few spins on it if you so desire. Those with a tight or tense scalp will need a bit heavier hand than those who simply hold less tension in the area—so play with the strength of your fingers, or even invest in a tool like a jade comb. "You can also use a scalp massage device (many of which are made to use in the shower). You can use a scalp massage device while you wash your hair, or out of the shower with your favorite hair oil," she says.