

New Research Links Hair Graying To Protection From Cancer



- *A new study found that having gray hair may be a sign your body is working to protect you from melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer.*
- *Researchers surmise that gray hair is caused by damaged melanocyte stem cells, which would otherwise divide and potentially cause cancer, exiting the body.*
- *Dermatologists caution that you should still use sunscreen regularly, whether you have gray hair or not.*

Changing attitudes toward [gray hair](#) are causing more women, including celebrities like [Jane Fonda](#), [Andie MacDowell](#), and [Melissa Gilbert](#), to proudly rock their silver locks. And new research is serving up yet another reason to be thankful that you've got some grays: It could be a sign that your body is fighting off cancer.

That's the major conclusion from a buzzy new study published in [Nature Cell Biology](#). The study links gray hair with a lower risk of melanoma, but dermatologists warn against thinking you're in the clear if you have a few grays.

Meet the experts: [Ife J. Rodney](#), MD, is the founding director of Eternal Dermatology + Aesthetics. [Yasuaki Mohri](#), PhD, is the lead study author and assistant professor in the Division of Aging and Regeneration at The University of Tokyo. [Gary Goldenberg](#), MD, is the assistant clinical professor of dermatology at Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital.

Here's what the study found, plus what you can actually take away from it.

What did the study find?

To conduct this research, scientists examined the melanocyte stem cells of rodents. These special cells in the hair follicle are responsible for your hair's pigmentation, and researchers wanted to see what would happen when they were exposed to carcinogens (melanocyte stem cells are involved in the development of melanoma, one of the deadliest [forms of skin cancer](#)).

The study authors discovered that melanocyte stem cells responded in one of two ways when they were exposed stress: They changed and left the system, leading to gray hair, or they continued dividing, which could signal the development of tumors. "While gray hair develops, the risk of melanoma simultaneously decreases," says [Yasuaki Mohri](#), PhD, lead study author and assistant professor in the Division of Aging and Regeneration at The University of Tokyo.

Why gray hair may guard against melanoma.

Gray hair doesn't necessarily *protect* you from developing a future case of melanoma, but it could be a sign that your body has already tried to ward off the disease. "Our study shows that the depletion of melanocyte stem cells functions as a protective mechanism against melanoma," Mohri says. This happens because damaged melanocyte stem cells which could otherwise cause cancer are eliminated from the hair follicle, Mohri explains.

This "makes sense," because the melanocyte stem cells make pigment, says [Ife J. Rodney](#), MD, founding director of Eternal Dermatology + Aesthetics. "When they're gone, they stop functioning, and you have a loss of pigment in the hair," she says.

What does this mean for your actual melanoma risk?

Dermatologists warn against getting cocky about your risk of developing melanoma—and forgoing the regular use of [sunscreen](#)—simply because you have gray hair. It's certainly not guaranteed that you won't get melanoma if you have silver strands, says [Gary Goldenberg](#), MD, assistant clinical professor of dermatology at Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital, who sees plenty of patients with the disease who have gray hair.

You have a higher risk of developing melanoma as you get older, and aging is also linked to developing gray hair, Dr. Rodney notes. “I would not use gray hair to predict a higher or lower risk of melanoma,” she says. “There are a lot of other variables that can lead to skin cancers.” Those include a history of [sunburn](#), chronic sun exposure, and a family history of skin cancer, she adds. Having light skin, light hair, and light eyes, is also linked with an increased risk, along with [tanning bed use](#), Goldenberg says.

4 Mineral Sunscreens Loved By Women's Health Editors And Dermatologists

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If you have an oily complexion, the last thing you want to do is add a shine-inducing SPF to the mix. But you're not out of options: This formula has a fluffy, weightless texture that won't clog pores. Plus, it works great as a primer under makeup, so if you're a concealer girl, you'll love it.

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CeraVe Hydrating Mineral Sunscreen Face Lotion SPF 50

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It's a sad-but-true fact: Many mineral sunscreens leave behind a white or gray tint on darker skin tones. But not all! Those with a deeper complexion will want to look for a tinted mineral SPF, like this one, which our beauty editor [raves about](#).

Best For Sensitive Skin



Cocokind Daily SPF

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This zinc oxide-based SPF is recommended by the [National Eczema Association](#), so you can be sure that it's non-irritating and suitable for the crankiest of complexions. Also of note: It contains phytoplankton and microalgae to provide even more of an antioxidant boost.

As a result, Rodney recommends continuing to slather on [the right amount of sunscreen](#) daily, whether you have gray hair or not. "Strict sun protection is key." And ultimately, she says more research is needed, including on humans—not mice. "This can be informative, but having gray hair should not be used to try to predict your melanoma risk or alter your behavior," she says. "You still need to practice sun protection."



[Korin Miller](#)

Korin Miller is a freelance writer specializing in general wellness, sexual health and relationships, and lifestyle trends, with work appearing in Men's Health, Women's Health, Self, Glamour, and more. She has a master's degree from American University, lives by the beach, and hopes to own a teacup pig and taco truck one day.



Reviewed by [Brian Underwood](#)

Beauty Director

Brian Underwood is beauty director at Women's Health, where he oversees content strategy for the brand across all platforms, including digital, print, and social. Underwood previously served as beauty and wellness director at Oprah Daily and O, The Oprah Magazine. During his

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