Is Race a Factor in Hair Damage and the Onset of Gray Hair?

Race and ethnicity may determine hair's susceptibility to certain kinds of damage and the onset of graying.

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As adults age, so does their hair, usually evidenced by graying. But what are the effects of race on hair? A new study published in the Journal of Clinical and Aesthetic Dermatology by scientists at the Boston University School of Medicine (BUSM) reveals that a person's race can predispose their hair to specific types of injury and determine when they will start to go gray.

For the assessment, BUSM researchers reviewed 69 publications to collect data on hair structure and aging and its response to external damage over time. In addition, investigators gathered information comparing these characteristics between races and ethnicities.

Scientists found that race affected when hair began to turn gray. For most Caucasians, hair started graying in their mid-30s, while for Asians and individuals of African descent hair began to gray in their late 30s and mid-40s, respectively.

Caucasians and Asians were most likely to sustain damage to the distal hair shaft, which is the hair above the skin, while African Americans experienced the most harm to their hair closest to its root. Researchers attributed to the harsh chemicals in the hair relaxers many African Americans use.

"Despite a similar chemical composition, the structural properties of hair vary between different ethnicities, and, consequently, the aging of hair differs as well," said Neelam Vashi, MD, associate professor of dermatology at BUSM, director of the Boston University Cosmetic and Laser Center and the study's corresponding author. "As the population ages and becomes more diverse, it is of greater necessity to understand the hair aging process in different types of hair."

Investigators concluded that it's key that doctors understand the unique characteristics of hair aging among various races and ethnicities in order for them to make culturally sensitive recommendations for the prevention of hair damage.

For related coverage, read "Many Dermatologists Lack Medical Expertise in Treating Black People."

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