

- Stress / Virus

## Is the pandemic giving you stress-related dandruff? Here's what to do

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Here's an unexpected health concern that stems from the pandemic: a flaky, scaly and sometimes itchy scalp. "Since the pandemic began, people who never had scalp issues before suddenly experienced dandruff or an itchy scalp, an excessively oily scalp and pimples or acne on their scalp," Singapore-based trichologist Kim Fong says.

That's because stress plays a role in our scalp's health, Fong says – and who has not faced increased stress since Covid-19 began?

Andrea Clark, a trichologist and hairstylist who works in Hong Kong and Australia, regularly sees clients of all ages with dandruff – one of three common scalp conditions.

People with dandruff often believe it is caused by a dry scalp when it is actually oily. An overgrowth of a type of yeast called Malassezia is the cause – it helps skin cells grow and reach the surface much faster than the normal 28 to 30 days.

Seborrheic dermatitis, also known as eczema, is an inflammatory skin disorder that also affects the face and torso. According to Clark, the problem presents as yellow, flaky scales.

It affects the areas around the front of the scalp rich in sebaceous glands and the skin is often itchy and red. The cause of this condition isn't known, but Clark says genetics may play a part.

"Psoriasis is another problem that can affect the scalp," she says. "The scales are usually dry and silvery and the skin is red and inflamed. Itching isn't a normal feature of psoriasis but it can be. Psoriasis is common and is often triggered by stress. Sufferers tend to have a genetic predisposition to it."

Of the three conditions, Clark says that dandruff is the easiest to control using products recommended by a trichologist, barber or hairstylist.

If you are among those who have those unsightly flecks of skin sprinkling your shoulders, certain lifestyle and environmental factors may compound it, Fong says. Eating an unhealthy diet and using the wrong hair products are two common culprits.

Clark says dandruff may also be triggered by allergens in certain hair products, excessive perspiration on the scalp and infrequent shampooing.

To minimise the itching, flaking, shedding and discomfort dandruff causes, it's important to keep your scalp clean and to follow healthy lifestyle habits.

Here are a few ways to take charge:

### 1. Massage your scalp

Once- or twice-weekly massages can improve blood circulation in the scalp, boosting hair cell activity and production within the hair follicles, Fong says.

"Using an essential oil or a recommended scalp solution, massage your temples, crown, the back of your head, behind your ears and the nape of your neck. Press your fingers firmly onto your scalp and use gentle clockwise motions. Avoid pulling your hair. Each session should not exceed 15 minutes."

### 2. Cleanse your scalp daily

"Some people think that daily cleansing causes hair loss but that's not true, because a clean scalp is a healthy scalp," Clark says.

“Daily cleansing with an antidandruff shampoo gets rid of the flakes and prevents them from returning. Once the condition improves, use the anti-dandruff shampoo weekly.”

### 3. Give yourself a “sacial” (scalp facial)

Clark recommends doing what she calls a “sacial”, or a facial for the scalp, twice a month at home. This includes wetting the hair in the shower and then exfoliating with a gentle scalp scrub.

Next, cleanse with an anti-dandruff shampoo and apply a scalp mask. Use the time while the mask is on to massage your scalp. After conditioning and towel drying your hair, Clark suggests applying a tonic, like natural witch hazel, to the scalp. Don’t rinse it out, as it has anti-itching and antimicrobial properties.

As itchy as your scalp may feel, don’t scratch the area because this will only make the problem worse. Instead, Clark says to spray or dab witch hazel onto the itchy spots to help soothe the skin.

### 5. Apply coconut oil

If you’re looking for an affordable and effective home remedy for dandruff, Clark recommends applying coconut oil to your scalp once a month, leaving it on for 20 minutes. Coconut oil has antibacterial properties, which will keep your scalp in good condition.

“Since stress can trigger the shedding that causes dandruff, I would advise you to try and reduce whatever might be causing stress and to get sufficient quality sleep every night,” Clark says.

“Keeping your gut healthy is also important, so eat gut-healthy foods, drink plenty of water, avoid sugar and processed foods, and, in some cases, avoid gluten.”