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Analyzing the Long-term Effects of Cosmetic Hair Treatments on Scalp Microbiota

Rienstra Ruiz*

Department of Clinical Dermatology, Ramon Llull University, Barcelona, Spain

Introduction

The interplay between cosmetic hair treatments and scalp microbiota has emerged as an area of increasing scientific interest. Cosmetic hair treatments, encompassing hair dyes, straighteners, perms, and chemical relaxers, have gained widespread popularity for their transformative effects on hair aesthetics. However, the potential long-term impact of these treatments on the delicate ecosystem of the scalp microbiota warrants a comprehensive analysis.

The scalp microbiota, a dynamic consortium of microorganisms including bacteria, fungi, and viruses, plays a critical role in maintaining scalp health. It establishes a protective barrier against pathogenic organisms, modulates immune responses, and contributes to the overall health of hair follicles. Disruptions to this microbial equilibrium can result in conditions such as dandruff, seborrheic dermatitis, and hair loss. The chemical compositions of hair treatments often include substances that may alter the scalp's pH, disrupt lipid layers, or introduce cytotoxic compounds, potentially influencing microbial composition and activity.

The long-term effects of hair dyes, a prominent category of cosmetic hair treatments, have been a subject of particular scrutiny. Permanent hair dyes often contain ammonia and hydrogen peroxide, which can disrupt the scalp's natural pH balance. These chemicals, while effective at altering hair pigmentation, may impair the growth of beneficial bacteria like Cutibacterium acnes. Conversely, they may create an environment conducive to opportunistic pathogens, such as Malassezia species, which are implicated in dandruff and other scalp disorders [1-3]. Additionally, oxidative stress induced by hydrogen peroxide can lead to inflammation, further compromising microbial homeostasis.

Chemical straighteners and relaxers, designed to break down the disulfide bonds in hair for a smoother appearance, often incorporate high concentrations of sodium hydroxide, guanidine hydroxide, or thioglycolates. These substances are highly alkaline and can cause significant changes in the scalp's pH. The altered pH environment may suppress commensal microbes that thrive in a slightly acidic milieu while encouraging the proliferation of alkaline-tolerant species. Moreover, repeated application of these treatments can lead to cumulative damage to the scalp's stratum corneum, the outermost skin layer, which serves as a habitat and barrier for microbiota.

Description

Another area of concern is the use of hair sprays, gels, and other styling products that leave residues on the scalp. These products often contain alcohols, silicones, and polymers that can create an occlusive layer over the scalp. This layer may impede the natural exchange of gases and moisture, creating a hypoxic environment unfavorable for certain aerobic microorganisms. Prolonged use of such products can foster an imbalance, favoring anaerobic bacteria, which may contribute to conditions like folliculitis.

Frequent washing with shampoos and conditioners formulated for hair treated with these cosmetic products may further compound the impact on scalp microbiota. Many shampoos contain surfactants such as sodium lauryl sulfate, which are effective at removing oils and residues but can also strip away natural lipids that support microbial diversity. Conditioners, often rich in quaternary ammonium compounds, can introduce additional chemical residues that linger on the scalp. Together, these practices may lead to a cyclical disruption of the microbial ecosystem, necessitating further investigation into the cumulative effects of routine hair care.

The long-term ramifications of these disruptions extend beyond the microbiota to broader scalp health. Imbalances in the microbial community can result in chronic inflammation, which has been linked to hair follicle miniaturization and subsequent hair thinning or loss. Furthermore, oxidative stress and immune dysregulation triggered by chemical treatments may exacerbate conditions like alopecia areata or androgenetic alopecia. The interplay between microbial imbalance and these conditions underscores the need for a holistic understanding of how cosmetic hair treatments influence both microbiota and broader scalp physiology [4,5].

Emerging research also highlights the potential for bioaccumulation of toxic substances from hair treatments over time. Compounds such as para-phenylenediamine, a common ingredient in hair dyes, have been shown to have cytotoxic and genotoxic effects on human cells. The prolonged presence of such substances on the scalp may not only affect human keratinocytes but also alter the composition and function of resident microbial communities. This raises concerns about the potential for systemic effects stemming from chronic scalp exposure to these chemicals.

The demographic variability in the use and effects of cosmetic hair treatments further complicates the analysis. Cultural practices, genetic predispositions, and individual variations in microbiota composition can influence the extent to which treatments impact scalp health. For instance, individuals with naturally curly or coily hair, who are more likely to use chemical relaxers, may experience different microbial disruptions compared to those with straight hair. Similarly, regional differences in environmental factors, such as humidity and pollution, may interact with cosmetic treatments to shape microbial outcomes.

Advancements in metagenomic and metabolomic technologies are shedding light on these complex interactions. High-throughput sequencing enables detailed characterization of microbial communities, while metabolomic profiling provides insights into biochemical changes induced by cosmetic treatments. Studies utilizing these technologies have revealed shifts in microbial diversity and abundance associated with hair dye use, highlighting the potential for certain species to act as biomarkers of scalp health. For example, reduced levels of Lactobacillus species have been linked to increased susceptibility to scalp inflammation, while elevated levels of Staphylococcus aureus have been associated with impaired barrier function.

Probiotic and prebiotic interventions are emerging as promising strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of cosmetic hair treatments on scalp microbiota. Topical formulations containing beneficial microbes, such as Lactobacillus or Bifidobacterium species, have shown potential in restoring microbial balance and reducing inflammation. Prebiotics, which serve as substrates for beneficial microbes, can also be incorporated into shampoos and conditioners to support a healthy scalp environment. However, the efficacy and long-term safety of

***Address for Correspondence:** Rienstra Ruiz, Department of Clinical Dermatology, Ramon Llull University, Barcelona, Spain; E-mail: Rienstra.6868@gmail.com*

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these interventions require further investigation through well-designed clinical trials.

Consumer awareness and regulatory oversight are critical in addressing the potential risks associated with cosmetic hair treatments. Transparent labeling of ingredients and their potential effects on scalp health can empower consumers to make informed choices. Additionally, the development of safer alternatives, such as plant-based dyes and low-pH relaxers, may offer solutions that minimize microbial disruption. Collaborative efforts between cosmetic chemists, dermatologists, and microbiologists can drive innovation in this area, ensuring that aesthetic goals do not come at the expense of scalp health.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the long-term effects of cosmetic hair treatments on scalp microbiota represent a multifaceted issue at the intersection of dermatology, microbiology, and consumer health. While these treatments offer undeniable aesthetic benefits, their potential to disrupt the delicate microbial ecosystem of the scalp cannot be overlooked. Continued research, leveraging advanced technologies and interdisciplinary collaboration, is essential to unravel the complexities of these interactions. By prioritizing both aesthetic and health considerations, it is possible to achieve a harmonious balance that supports not only hair beauty but also the underlying microbial foundation that sustains it.

Acknowledgment

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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