

What wrinkling is to skin, graying is to hair. Both are signs that herald age. A woman despairs as much over the wrinkles that begin to line her face, as she does over the hair that turns white. Ageing, however, is a natural process. With time, the body ages and the signs of ageing manifest themselves ... graying is one of them.

Please send your questions and comments to beauty@citymasala.com.

The exact cause of premature graying is not known as yet. Some feel that the key to graying and premature graying lies in the immune system, while others are of the view that it is linked to hereditary factors and stress. What we do know is that hair turns white because pigment (coloring matter) ceases to form in the cortex (inner layer of the hair shaft). What we do not know is why this happens.

The strands of hair that have turned white cannot become black or dark again. The only way to change the color of white hair is by dyeing it, either with natural colorants like henna, or with chemical dyes. The use of chemical dyes and colorants has become a common practice. Unfortunately, most people do not know how the structure of the hair can be affected and all the other dangers of using chemical dyes.

Permanent dyes work by changing the structure of the hair. They have to reach the inner layer of the hair shaft to change its color. They actually strip off the outermost layer, the cuticle, in an uneven manner, in order to penetrate the inner layer. The cuticle actually protects the hair and contributes to its shine. Damage to the cuticle not only makes the hair more vulnerable to breakage and loss, but the hair also becomes dull and rough. Once you start

dyeing your hair, it becomes very difficult to stop. After a while, the roots begin to show and have to be touched up which means that the scalp is also exposed to the effects of the dye. The hair becomes discolored and the texture suffers. In order to camouflage the discoloration, dyeing has to be repeated and the cycle goes on.

The skin is the largest living and breathing organ of our body. It has an extremely efficient ability to absorb. People do not realize that the skin is one of the first organs to come in contact with chemicals, either through exposure to pollutants in the air, or with the use of chemical products, like hair dyes. With repeated dyeing, the few minutes add up and have a cumulative effect, which is even worse. Whatever is absorbed by the skin enters the blood stream. Since the human body has an in-built resistance to chemical ingredients, there is a build-up of chemical residue in the body.

I wonder how many people know what permanent dyes are. They are also called "para" dyes, because they are based on paraphenylenediamine. According to Philip Kingsley, a world renowned trichologist (hair specialist), this chemical (also known as PPD or para) is similar to that derived from coal tar. A skin patch test is done before using chemical

dyes for the simple reason that allergic reactions are very common. In fact, they can be highly allergic.

Coloring of the hair is not really new. Since ancient times, Henna, Walnuts and Indigo have been used to color the hair and add shine. Today, hair coloring has caught on in a big way and various types of semi-permanent and temporary coloring methods are available. Hair coloring is the mantra of the day. But, a word of warning. However glamorous it may look, hair colorants and dyes can cause a lot of hair damage.

Semi permanent colorants do not lift the natural color of the hair, so they are not as damaging as permanent dyes. However, repeated coloring and dyeing makes the hair dry, rough and brittle. Semi-permanent colors may last for 15 to 20 shampoos.

If you use colorants, take good care of the hair by using hair conditioners each time you shampoo your hair. Use mild shampoos to limit further damage. Use hot oil applications once or twice a week. You can also follow methods that limit the damage by streaking or frosting.

Look out for April's issue in which I'll give you tips on streaking and frosting for a healthier option to dyeing.

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