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Dandruff vs. Dry Scalp: Is There a Difference?

Find out how dandruff and dry skin are related—plus the best treatment options.



If you've ever experienced dandruff or a dry scalp, then you know it's the literal worst—and the difference between the two isn't super obvious. If

you're wondering about the cause of (and best solution for) your flakes, we've got you covered.

Here's a complete breakdown of dandruff vs. dry scalp and what to do about both. (Related: [10 Scalp-Saving Products for Healthier Hair](#))

Dandruff vs. Dry Scalp

Dandruff is the term for the tiny flakes of skin, dried oil, and dirt build-up that develop on your scalp. Meanwhile, a dry scalp is one that has very little oil on it.

In some cases, dandruff flakes are simply a result of a dry scalp, which can happen due to poor scalp care (like using drying products or shampooing too often), according to Sheel Desai Solomon, M.D., a dermatologist in North Carolina

In other cases, dandruff is caused by an overgrowth of yeast. Surprise! You (and everyone else) has a fungal yeast organism called *Malassezia* living on your scalp. This yeast is thought to contribute to dandruff in some people because it produces oleic acid, a fatty acid that can irritate the skin and cause flakes, says Dr. Solomon. Here comes the fun part: If your dandruff is caused by an overgrowth of yeast, you likely *also* have a dry scalp.

"*Malassezia* feeds on the oil on the scalp and that dries out the scalp even further," says Dr. Solomon.

One more time for the confused faces in the back: Basically, it's possible for a dry scalp to cause dandruff, and for a yeast overgrowth to cause both dandruff *and* a dry scalp.

But just because you have dandruff doesn't mean you have a yeast overgrowth. FTR, you can't "catch" the fungal organism—everyone has *Malassezia* living on their scalp—and only some people experience an overgrowth. So why does it accumulate? A range of factors could be to blame, including skin conditions, chemicals in your hair products, the weather, medications, and stress levels, says Dr. Solomon.

In addition to having a dry scalp or a yeast overgrowth, dandruff can also result from certain skin conditions, including psoriasis, eczema, seborrheic dermatitis (a combination of red skin, inflammation, and flakes) as well as contact dermatitis (an allergic reaction to a substance, such as hair products).

How to Prevent and Treat Dandruff

Good news: Mild cases of dandruff usually doesn't require medical treatment. If you're experiencing scabbing, incessant itching, redness, or prolonged outbreaks, it's best to visit a doctor, says Dr. Solomon.

Unfortunately, it can be difficult to discern whether your dandruff is caused by yeast or a dry scalp. The good news is that the first-step method to treat them both is the same: You might just need to adjust your shower routine.

For one, shampooing too much can increase irritation, but not shampooing enough can lead to oil buildup, says dermatologist Sandy Skotnicki, M.D.,

author of *Beyond Soap*. For most people, the sweet spot is to shampoo every other day.

Second, some shampoos can be drying or irritating. The Mayo Clinic suggests switching to a gentle shampoo as a good starting point for treating dandruff, whatever the cause. **Eucerin DermoCapillaire Calming Urea Shampoo** (Buy it, \$22, [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)) and **Vanicream Free & Clear Sensitive Skin Shampoo** (Buy it, \$10, [target.com](https://www.target.com)) are two mild options. You should especially consider switching if you're using a heavy, fragranced shampoo with many botanical ingredients. They often contribute to mild dandruff and inflammation accompanied by an intense itch, according to Dr. Skotnicki. (Here's more on how to care for a dry scalp.)

If that doesn't work, it may be a sign you're battling yeast: Try switching to an anti-dandruff shampoo. "We usually suggest starting with shampoos that decrease the inflammation or the fungal organisms such as tar shampoos, steroid shampoos, or anti-fungal shampoos," says Dr. Skotnicki. Steroid shampoos require a prescription, but you can buy a tar shampoo like **Neutrogena T/Gel** (Buy it, \$8, [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)) or anti-fungal shampoo like **Nizoral** (Buy it, \$15, [cvs.com](https://www.cvs.com)) over the counter. (Related: [How to Combat the Effects of Winter On Your Scalp](#))

Dandruff in any form is a total pain, but on the bright side, it's usually easily treated. And if all these methods fail, you know the drill: Give your doc a call.

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