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Getting it straight: Untangling the Keratin Controversy

by Cheryl Fenton | May 02, 2011

Everyone wants less tress stress. And although gals with straight hair might beg to differ, taming an unruly curly mane is probably the toughest hair challenge out there. So it's no surprise that keratin treatments became huge successes when they hit the mainstream. Now women dealt curly hair can have straight locks without a daily blowout hassle. All's right in the world, right?

As it turns out, there might be a kink in that plan. The popular treatments that once had women (and men) running from their flat irons and into the arms of their stylists are now at the center of a heated debate over safety.

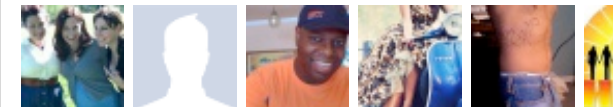
But before delving into that debate, let's first define a few terms. Although touted as straightening treatments, these keratin services are actually intense conditioning treatments that result in super-flat, super-silky locks. They create smoothness by filling in the gaps of porous strands with proteins like those already found in your hair. "Keratin treatments" is something of a catchall term, and the specific formulas vary slightly from



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brand to brand. One of the best known is the Brazilian Blowout, a brand that boasts of a proprietary system that bonds amino acids to hair. It lasts about three months and is a favorite among the "instant gratification" crowd - there's no waiting period required. Other keratin treatments last up to six months but are generally followed by three tough-to-handle days during which you're forbidden to shampoo, wear hair elastics, or even put sunglasses atop your head. Both types of treatments start at around \$350, calm even the frizziest of hair, and allow for much easier blow-drying, often cutting drying time in half.

The process itself seems simple enough. In keratin treatments, the hair is typically clarified three times and then blow-dried. The stylist paints the formula onto sections of hair; after 20 minutes, the hair is blow-dried again and then flat-ironed. The BB is even easier. The solution is applied to towel-dried hair, immediately blow-dried in, and then flat-ironed. And voila! Hydrated and healthy-looking straight hair.


□

But, some say, that dreamy semi-perm smoothness might come at a price: the fumes from these formulas could be dangerous for you and your stylist. Back in October, Oregon's Occupational Safety and Health Administration conducted tests of the Brazilian Blowout solution in response to a stylist's complaints about difficulty breathing, nose bleeds, and eye irritation. Their research found the solution contained formaldehyde at levels ranging from 6.3 to 10.6 percent, far above the .1 percent level at which specific hazard labeling is required. (Formaldehyde can cause skin and respiratory irritation, and the US Environmental Protection Agency has classified it as a probable carcinogen at high levels, making it a not-so-pretty part of the beauty industry.) Then when a "formaldehyde-free" version of the product started

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hitting the salons, the lab analyzed samples and still found that they contained roughly 8.5 percent formaldehyde - seems the term "free" isn't necessarily an exact science. Several other brands' hair-smoothing products were tested and found to have some formaldehyde, but at far lower concentrations.

In response to the controversy, Canada has already banned more than 10 hair-smoothing lines, and fashion-forward France recently pulled products as well. Here in the States, the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration released a safety advisory in April. And the Food and Drug Administration announced that it's working with OSHA to evaluate whether formaldehyde may be released into the air after the products are applied and heated.



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The feds aren't the only ones concerned. Ouidad, a stylist known as "the queen of curl" for her pioneering curl-friendly cuts and products, is a vocal critic of the treatments that have captivated much of her curly-haired market. "I am definitely on a crusade against Brazilian Blowout and keratin treatments," she says. "They're extremely damaging - everything from the chemicals infused into the treatments to the hot tools applied directly to the hair are harmful beyond belief. It's also dangerous for the stylists facilitating the treatments as they're subjected to these dangerous chemicals daily. And I'm not convinced these treatments are formaldehyde-free."

So where does this leave us? Clients should just stop partaking in these hair-smoothing services, right? Let's get one thing straight: people aren't always willing to drop something that works, even if it means a potential health

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risk.

"Women every day take part in beauty treatments that have concerns," says Billy Boney, a stylist at **Mizu Boston** (776 Boylston Street, Boston, **617.585.6498**) who performs three keratin treatments per week. "There's a risk in a lot of things that will change women's lives. There will always be controversy surrounding successful beauty treatments."



Photo: JANICE CHECCHIO

"The problem with the keratin treatment is that the results are fantastic. There's really no good substitute for it," says Joanna Elkayam, manager of **Avanti South** (141 Dorchester Avenue, South Boston, 617.482.1003).

That being said, Elkayam has still seen a drastic decrease in the number of requests coming into the salon, citing the November 2010 *New York Times* article "A Safety Kink in Hair Relaxing" as the beginning of the end. This feature story rocked the hair world with its striking visual: a photo of both stylist and customer wearing gas masks during a keratin treatment.

"We used to have two or more keratin requests every single day," says Elkayam. "Almost overnight, the number dropped by about 90 percent to maybe one or none per week." Since then demand has picked back up, with the salon doing up to four treatments a week, but it's nowhere near where it used to be.



Photo: JANICE CHECCHIO

As the demand for Mizu's keratin treatments naturally decreases during

wintertime and picks up with summer on the horizon, Boney is still waiting to see whether there'll be backlash because of the concerns. But some salons may be finding that any press is good press. Curiosity about this controversial treatment seems to have some women booking appointments just to see what all the fuss is about. Between its three smoothing treatments, **Salon Mario Russo** (9 Newbury Street, Boston, 617.424.6676) has seen an increase in demand in recent months, with an average of 12 to 18 treatments per week.

Joanna Humphrey of Boston got her first keratin treatment in NYC's Bumble and bumble and, despite the debate, has since returned five times to Salon Mario Russo for what she calls a life-changing treatment.

"I'm a total keratin fan. I find the controversy incredibly confusing and one-sided," she says. "I've spoken to many experts on the subject who confidently confirm it's safe. It seems as though the media is just searching for drama."



Photo: JANICE CHECCHIO

Humphrey doesn't discount the possibility of danger if your hair is in the wrong hands. "This isn't a treatment you should skimp on for the sake of following the trend. There are unsafe products out there; however, I have always gone to those who put safety first by using 100 percent formaldehyde-free formulas. I'll continue to get it done," says Humphrey, who suggests researching a salon's products in advance of a treatment.

"We believe in the integrity of the hair, and in the health of our clients, so we would absolutely never put beauty before health," says Jonathan DeMar,

senior stylist for Salon Mario Russo, which claims to have been the first salon on Newbury Street to offer keratin treatments. "Unfortunately, there are always going to be products that, at the detriment to a client's health, cut corners for the sake of cutting costs. We highly encourage women interested in the treatment to be sure they go to a salon that doesn't carry these products."

Yael Frydman of Boston agrees. An Avanti South client with coarse curly hair, she has 12 keratin treatments under her belt. She'll continue to tame her frizzy mane every three months - provided the salon keeps up its end of the safety bargain. A healthcare professional herself, she strives to maintain a good balance between health and beauty.

"I make sure the salon I get it done in is roomy and well-ventilated, so air can circulate and we're not breathing the fumes," she says. "We live in a society where image is extremely valued, so I can certainly see how sometimes aesthetics prevails over health. Each individual sets their own line. Just stay informed from a valid source of the advantages, disadvantages, and risks of whatever you're doing and make your decision."

Salon owners are likewise adapting to concerns over potential health risks to clients and staff. From new ventilation systems to restrictions on the number of treatments done per week, safety precautions have begun on Boston's salon scene.



Photo: JANICE CHECCHIO

"We make sure all of our stylists know we're doing a treatment," says Boney. "We keep it to one a day, move the client to the back of the salon where the ventilation is better, and keep the back door open. We offer

masks to the clients or anyone around them." But he's confident in the keratin treatment he uses: "I have done my research, weighed my pros and cons, and decided I would keep offering the service." The salon has, however, stopped offering the Brazilian Blowout because of concerns over the formaldehyde levels.

"Luckily for our salon, we're located in a gold-level LEED-certified building (the Macallen building), which was designed with a green ventilation system that circulates high-volume fresh air, filtered by charcoal," says Elkayam. Still, when the staff heard the treatments might give off dangerous fumes, they decided to implement a limit of one treatment per day and skip them altogether on Saturdays.

Retraining has also been a big part of attempts to prevent health risks, says Seth Selman, a stylist at **James Joseph Salon** (30 Newbury Street, Boston, 617.266.7222). "Stylists have been retrained in the past three or four months to use less product during the treatments," he explains. "In the past, when you used too much product on the hair, tons of steam came up and would go right up into your face." Less product and less steam mean fewer fumes released into the salon.

Despite all these precautions, some locals have still decided they're done with the keratin 'do. Erika Cohen of Boston stopped getting treatments on her very curly locks. "I heard the treatments were actually dangerous to those receiving the treatment and those giving it," she says. "It made me think twice about going in for another treatment, so for now I have put them off."



Photo: JANICE CHECCHIO

Cohen has replaced her keratin regimen with regular conditioning treatments to keep her hair moisturized. And to tame her curls and frizz, she uses the titanium flat iron by Hair By Avi, available at Avanti South for \$185. Elkayam has seen sales of this iron double as concerns over keratin have grown.

"These professional treatment irons heat up to 450 degrees, the temperature needed for the keratin to bond to your hair," she explains. "It doesn't permanently change your hair without the keratin solution, but your hair is like silk afterwards. Although it's not semi-permanent, at least there's no health worries."

Of course, the path women take in pursuit of beauty has never been smooth. The current debate over keratin treatments is just a small thread of a larger conversation about the price of beauty practices. "It takes work for women to keep up their beauty," says Cohen, "but there's a difference between working hard for your beauty and putting yourself in harm's way. There are so many different beauty brands and solutions; it's just a matter of doing a little extra research to find the non-harmful solution, instead of going with the trend of the day."

"For some it may be worth it, for others not," agrees Humphrey. "The desire to 'perfect' yourself can sometimes be incredibly powerful. I'm a strong believer in women accepting themselves for who they are and putting their health first and foremost."

"I think the beauty-at-any-cost mentality died when the recession started," adds Elkayam. "This keratin kerfuffle shows how we have changed the way we value health and beauty, and that's a good thing." But she sympathizes 100 percent with those who opt for the treatments, as she herself wrestles

with a full head of crazy curly hair. "I think chemical exposure is on everyone's mind these days. I use only non-toxic natural makeup and buy organic when I can, but even Al Gore himself couldn't stop me from getting my hair done."

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