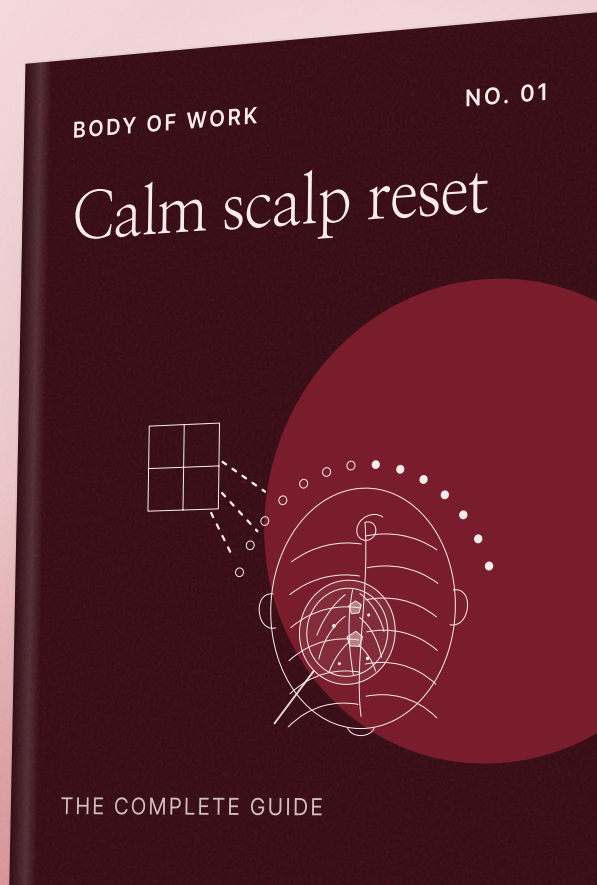




HOW-TO GUIDE · SCALP

Read your flakes and reset your scalp in two weeks

For anyone sorting flakes, itch or waxy buildup at home. You will be able to tell buildup from dryness and dandruff, wash without stripping, and follow a two week reset.



Know flakes

Oily yellow flakes that return with oil point toward dandruff, dry white flakes toward dryness.



Wash well

Fingertips, lukewarm water and a full rinse protect the barrier while lifting residue.



Reset steady

Clarify once, treat the cause, then keep a rhythm you can hold.

By Ellen Sloane · Updated Sep 17, 2026 · 12 min read

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Flakes on a dark shirt make most people reach for more moisture or more shampoo. Both moves can miss. Once you can read flake size, scalp feel and timing, washing gets simpler and gentler.

01

Tell buildup, dryness and dandruff apart

Flakes are not one thing. Dandruff typically forms large, oily flakes that are white or yellow and may stick to hair and scalp, while dry scalp forms smaller, dry white flakes. That size and stickiness check helps in daylight. Look at a part line after a full day without washing and note whether flakes sit loose on shoulders or cling near the roots.

Feel matters as much as sight. Dandruff is linked to excess sebum plus overgrowth of *Malassezia* yeast that feeds on oil and speeds skin cell shedding. The scalp may feel slick a day after washing, and flakes often return as oil returns. Dry scalp is linked to lack of moisture from cold dry weather, dehydration, over washing or harsh products that strip natural oils. There the scalp feels tight, sometimes itchy, and flakes look powdery rather than waxy.

Timing adds a third clue. Flaking in seborrheic dermatitis and dandruff is usually white to yellowish and may be oily or dry. Cold dry weather can bring on dryness in winter and ease in summer, while oily flakes that show up year round point more toward dandruff. Buildup muddies both patterns.

Dandruff is restricted to the scalp with itchy flaking without visible inflammation, while seborrheic dermatitis can affect scalp, face, ears and chest with inflammation and pruritus. Redness, greasy patches behind the ears or along the brows, or itch that stays after a good wash deserve a closer look. "Dandruff, seborrhoeic dermatitis of the scalp, is very common affecting almost half of all adults, regardless of their age, ethnicity or gender," notes the British Association of Dermatologists patient leaflet.

Buildup can mimic both ends. Layered stylers, oils and dry shampoo can leave grit at the roots, dull lengths and an itch that feels like dryness. A dermatology review of shampoo states shampoos clean sebum, sweat, scales, dirt and residues from oils, lotions and sprays, but removing all sebum leaves hair frizzy and dry. The goal is a clean scalp with some natural oil left on the hair, not a squeaky surface.

FROM THE EDITORS

Home checks narrow the pattern but they are not a clinical diagnosis. Dry scalp and dandruff can overlap, and buildup can mimic both, so track what you see for a week before you label it.

02

Run the two minute scalp self check

Work with a freshly washed baseline. Shampoo, condition the lengths, rinse fully, then wait about 24 hours before you judge. The pause lets oil return at its normal pace and shows whether flakes arrive with oil or with tightness.

Check flakes in good light

Part clean dry hair in three places, crown, temple and nape, near a window or bright lamp. Small dry white flakes with little cling lean toward dryness or light residue. Large white or yellow flakes that stick to the scalp or to hairs lean toward dandruff. Waxy coating on the scalp skin between hairs often means layered product plus sebum.

Press and scan the skin

Press a clean fingertip to the scalp for three seconds, then look at the pad. A slick fingerprint with yellowish flakes fits an oily pattern. A dry fingertip with powdery dust fits dryness. Then scan beyond the hairline. Flakes or redness at the brows, sides of the nose, behind the ears or on the chest point toward seborrheic dermatitis rather than simple dryness.

Note triggers and timing

Write down wash day, products used, weather and heat styling for seven days. Cold dry weather, prolonged sun, harsh chemicals and alcohol based skin products can worsen seborrheic dermatitis symptoms, according to Cleveland Clinic guidance. Over washing or a harsh shampoo can bring on tightness within hours. Under rinsing or heavy layering tends to itch most on day two or three.

Seek care when the pattern stays unclear or severe. Book a dermatologist for redness with swelling, thick plaques, sores from scratching, hair shedding with bald patches, odor that persists after washing, or flakes plus face or chest involvement. Bring your one week notes and product list. "It isn't contagious and can come and go throughout your life," notes the Cleveland Clinic medical review, which is why a steady plan matters more than a single strong wash.

Wash, massage and rinse without stripping

A reset starts with technique, not a stronger shampoo. Modern washing relies on chemistry plus hands. A dermatology review of shampoo states modern shampoos use synthetic detergents with oil attracting and water attracting sites to remove sebum with water. Massage loosens scale and residue so water can carry it away.

Use lukewarm water from start to finish. Hot water feels good on an itchy scalp but dries skin and roughs the cuticle, while cold water leaves oils and conditioners half rinsed. Pre rinse for 60 seconds, longer for dense or coily hair, until hair feels fully wet to the skin.

The five step wash

1. Dispense shampoo for the scalp only. For short or fine hair, one coin sized pool often covers the first cleanse. For long or dense hair, split that amount between crown and nape.
2. Massage with fingertips, not nails, for 60 to 90 seconds. Move skin in small circles from hairline to crown to nape, then around and behind the ears.
3. Rinse fully for at least 60 seconds. Lift sections so water reaches the nape and sideburn area where residue hides.
4. Repeat a light second cleanse when hair holds oil, stylers or dry shampoo. The second lather usually foams faster and rinses cleaner.
5. Place conditioner from mid length to ends. Keep heavy conditioner off the scalp unless the label directs scalp use, then rinse until water runs clear.

Wash rhythm depends on oil, activity and hair shape, with no fixed schedules for straight, wavy, curly and coily hair. Straight and fine hair often oils faster and may need more frequent washing. Wavy hair may hold two to three days with a light second cleanse. Curly and coily hair often holds longer between washes to protect moisture, with scalp cleansing on wash day plus conditioning to limit dryness. Judge by scalp feel at 24 hours, not by the calendar alone.

Medicated shampoo needs contact time to work. Mayo Clinic guidance lists nonprescription dandruff shampoo actives as pyrithione zinc, selenium sulfide, ketoconazole 1 percent, tar and salicylic acid. Use medicated shampoos once a day or 2 to 3 times a week for several weeks under Mayo Clinic guidance, leaving them on for the recommended time, then using them weekly or every two weeks to prevent relapse. Leave the lather on the scalp for the minutes stated on the label, then rinse. People with light colored hair should note that shampoo with tar or selenium sulfide can discolor light colored hair, per the same guidance.

For thick scale, softening helps before combing. Mayo Clinic guidance states mineral oil, peanut oil or olive oil left on scalp for 1 to 3 hours can soften and help remove scales before combing and washing. Use a thin layer, comb gently with a wide tooth comb, then shampoo out fully.

During active treatment, Mayo Clinic guidance states people treating seborrheic dermatitis should stop hair sprays, gels and styling products during treatment and avoid alcohol containing skin and hair products.

04

What products leave behind and how to clarify

Most residue comes from useful products used in thick layers. Silicones in serums can smooth frizz but layered silicone serums build up when washing is light or rushed. Thick waxy stylers coat roots and attract dust and sweat. Oils seal moisture on lengths but pooled on the scalp they mix with sebum and hold flakes in place. Dry shampoo uses absorbent starches or clays such as rice or tapioca starch to draw out sebum at the roots, and overuse can cause accumulation.

Water changes the picture. A salon hard water guide states calcium and magnesium can bond to sebum and product residue to form a film that regular shampoo may not fully lift. Hair may feel coated when wet, dry dull and tangly, and the scalp may itch even right after washing. The same guide states thick waxy stylers, heavy dry shampoos and layered silicone serums build up faster in hard water and need intentional use plus regular clarifying.

LEAVES THE FILM	WHAT IT DOES ON THE SCALP	HOW TO LIFT IT
Silicone serums and heavy leave ins	Smooth lengths but layer near roots when over applied	Clarifying shampoo on the scalp, full rinse, lighter dose next time
Waxes, clays and gels	Hold style and trap sweat and flakes	Double cleanse on wash day, pause during dandruff treatment
Oils and scalp oils	Soften scale but pool with sebum when heavy	Thin layer only, shampoo out fully, avoid daily scalp layering
Starch or clay dry shampoo	Soak up oil for a day, then add grit	Limit to one or two days between washes, brush out before next wash
Hard water minerals	Bond with oil and residue into a film	Clarifying or chelating wash as directed, then condition lengths

Clarifying means a stronger detergent wash that removes stylers, oils and mineral film. Chelating means a formula aimed at mineral deposits. Ingredient types differ rather than comparisons, so no single clarifying or chelating formula is best for everyone. Use a clarifying wash when hair feels coated, looks dull after a normal wash, or holds a waxy scalp film, often once every two to four weeks for most routines and more often in hard water or heavy styler use. Follow with conditioner on lengths, since a full strip leaves hair frizzy and dry.

Tightly coiled or chemically treated hair needs a gentler hand. Ketoconazole shampoo can worsen dryness and breakage risk in tightly coiled or chemically treated hair, so frequency and conditioning matter. Keep medicated shampoo on the scalp, keep time to the label, condition lengths well, and space clarifying washes further apart when ends feel brittle.

05

Scrubs, brushes and detox serums, plus when to suspect seborrheic dermatitis

Tools can help lift residue, but they do not reset biology on their own. Scalp brushes and scrubs may help lift residue but they do not cure dandruff or speed hair growth. Keep expectations practical and watch for irritation.

Physical scrubs use fine grains to buff away flakes. Chemical scrubs use salicylic or glycolic acid to loosen scale and oil. Either type can sting a scratched or inflamed scalp. Silicone scalp brushes help shampoo reach the skin through dense hair and lift loose flakes during massage. A scalp brush guide recommends scalp exfoliation about once a week and warns over exfoliation can irritate the scalp. Stop gritty scrubs and firm brushing during a flare with redness, sores or swelling. The same guide states people with damaged skin or psoriasis should pause scalp brush use until skin is healed.

Detox serums promise a fresh start in a bottle. Detox serums alone have not been shown to reset the scalp microbiome, with routines described rather than controlled trials. Treat a serum as a helper, not a fix. A salicylic serum may loosen oily scale before washing. A light oil may soften thick scale for an hour before shampooing. Rotation of medicated actives is sometimes suggested because medicated shampoos may lose effect over time for some people. Track response for two to three weeks before switching, and keep one active at a time unless a clinician advises layering.

Know the seborrheic dermatitis pattern. A Cleveland Clinic review states seborrheic dermatitis causes itchy, scaly and greasy patches, often on scalp and face, and is a lifelong condition with flare ups. Suspect it when scale looks yellow and greasy, when redness sits under flakes, when plaques feel thick, when itch persists after a thorough wash, when odor lingers, or when brows, ears or chest join in. British Association of Dermatologists guidance states *Malassezia* is present on normal skin but found in higher amounts in seborrhoeic dermatitis, with sensitivity to oleic acid and barrier changes linked to inflammation. That is why care often pairs an antifungal active such as ketoconazole with gentle anti inflammatory habits, regular washing, full rinsing and a pause on irritating stylers. Ask a dermatologist about prescription options when store shampoos fail after several weeks, when inflammation spreads, or when scratching breaks skin.

Two week reset and steady routine

Use this plan to lift residue first, then treat the likely cause while protecting the barrier. Keep notes and keep water lukewarm throughout.

Week one lifts and calms. Day one, pre rinse well, do a fingertip double cleanse, rinse the nape and ears, condition lengths. Day three or four, shampoo again and add one clarifying wash if film remains. Use a silicone brush lightly once this week if skin is intact. Pause waxes, heavy oils and dry shampoo for the full two weeks. If thick scale holds, use a thin oil layer for 1 to 3 hours before one wash, then comb gently and shampoo out.

Week two treats and steadies. Match shampoo to your self check. For an oily flake pattern, use a dandruff active 2 to 3 times that week with full contact time. For a dry tight pattern, wash when oily, keep conditioner off the scalp, and cut heat and alcohol based stylers. If a red greasy pattern shows up with face or ear involvement, follow dandruff care and book a dermatologist rather than scrubbing harder.

Hold the steady rhythm after day 14. Wash when the scalp feels oily or itchy, clarify only when film returns, exfoliate about once a week at most, and keep one medicated shampoo weekly or every two weeks to prevent relapse if it helped, as Mayo Clinic guidance suggests. Plan for flares in cold weather or stressful weeks with earlier washing and simpler styling. Ask a pediatrician before treating a child's scalp, and ask a dermatologist about ongoing shedding, plaques or broken skin.

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The checklist

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- ☐ Part hair in bright light and note flake size, color and cling
-
- ☐ Press scalp to test slick versus tight and scan brows and ears
-
- ☐ Pre rinse 60 seconds with lukewarm water before shampoo
-
- ☐ Massage 60 to 90 seconds with fingertips, include nape and ears
-
- ☐ Double cleanse when oily and rinse until water runs clear
-
- ☐ Keep conditioner on lengths and off the scalp
-
- ☐ Pause waxes, gels and dry shampoo during treatment weeks
-
- ☐ Clarify for film, then condition lengths the same wash
-
- ☐ Use one dandruff active with full contact time, then weekly for upkeep
-
- ☐ Exfoliate or brush about once a week, pause when skin is sore
-
- ☐ Log washes and triggers for two weeks before switching actives
-
- ☐ Book a dermatologist for redness, plaques, odor or spread to face
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Sources and further reading

- What Is Seborrheic Dermatitis? · my.clevelandclinic.org
- Seborrheic Dermatitis and Dandruff: A Comprehensive Review · [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)
- Shampoo and Conditioners: What a Dermatologist Should Know? · [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)
- Seborrheic dermatitis - Diagnosis and treatment · mayoclinic.org
- Seborrhoeic dermatitis · bad.org.uk
- Dandruff vs Dry Scalp: How to Tell Which You Have · theinkeylist.com

For information only, not medical advice. Hair loss, a scalp that will not settle, eczema flares and anything on a baby's skin belong with a dermatologist or a pediatrician.



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Ellen looks after the brands Body of Work works with and makes sure every sponsored page says so. She spent years in salon education for a professional hair care company, so she can tell a demonstration from a claim.
