

Read Item - Bird's Nest Hair and Dreadlocks

Author: RD Sinclair

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Abstract: Doctor's resource on Bird's Nest Hair and Dreadlocks

Key points

Matting is a sudden, widespread, often irreversible fusion of individual hair fibres during shampooing. It produces a mass of hair that resembles a bird's nest.

Definition

Matting of the scalp hair, or bird's nest hair is a sudden, usually irreversible tangling that occurs when shampooing.

Epidemiology

Not uncommon, but most cases are localised and dealt with by hairdressers.

Aetiology

The tangling is due to an interaction between the electrostatic forces generated by the rotary action of washing on weathered, high friction hairs.

Pathogenesis

Long hair that has not been cut for a number of years is a predisposing factor, as is badly weathered hair. The process is akin to felting, as utilised in the textile industry and recognised in the home when woollen clothing shrinks after incautious washing. The individual fibres become fused together and can only be teased apart with considerable force.

Electrostatic forces are normally present between hairs. They are increased by wetting the hair. The rotatory motion with which the shampoo is massaged into the scalp, together with the above factors, combine to produce this rare event.

Clinical features

Usually the hair is long and has not been cut for a number of years, often on religious. Bird's nest hair is a sudden and dramatic event that fortunately is rare. Such hair is presumably severely weathered and cuticular damage increases the friction between hairs.

Focal matting of the hair is probably a common occurrence, easily remedied by cutting or untangling the hair. Dreadlocks, as worn by Rastafarians, represent controlled matting of hair. The hair is deliberately styled in this fashion. After two to three years without washing or combing the hair, tightly bound locks form. Scanning electron microscopy of a lock does not always show fusion of adjacent shafts, but does show extensive hair weathering and some intertwining loops.

Pathology

Deposits of shampoo can be seen with the electron microscope bound to the hairs and matting individual fibres together. The hairs are not knotted, but actually fused together and thrown into intertwining loops.

Investigation

Light and electron microscopy demonstrate the fusion of individual hairs.

Differential Diagnosis

The clinical presentation is distinctive.

Associated Features

Other evidence of weathering is usually seen.

Prognosis

If the matted hair is shaved off recurrence is exceptional. If the hair is manually unmatted, the condition is likely to recur.

Treatment

One case was successfully disentangled after three months of diligent lubrication of the mass with olive oil and separation of the hair with a knitting needle, however in all other cases the affected hair had to be cut off.
