

# curl

issue no. 19

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STAR RUBY  
BARKER HAS  
A TON OF GRIT  
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PHOTO BY MIKHAIL NILOY

# WANT BEAUTIFUL, HEALTHY CURLS? START WITH WHAT YOU EAT

WRITTEN BY CHRISTY NICHOLSON

You are what you eat, the saying goes. But when it comes to hair, is it true? What you eat can change some aspects of your hair health, but there are a lot of myths and marketing ploys to wade through to get to the facts.

“Diet and nutrition are just as important to your hair health as they are to your overall body and well-being,” says Leyla Bates, a *Curl* Stylist Panelist who owns Lov Ley Curls Studio in Manassas, Virginia. “Nutrition is one part of the equation,” she says. “It’s something you can control.”

## Eat a balanced diet

So, what can a curly-haired person eat to keep those curls in beautiful shape? The experts agree: a balanced diet. There’s no miracle menu to help your hair grow extra long or fast, but eating a wide range of nutritious foods will help keep your hair healthy.

According to Christine Warrick, a registered dietitian nutritionist in Nashville, Tennessee, the first step is to eat enough calories to power your body through the day. “Once you have established that, you can focus on variety,” says Warrick. “And when I say variety, I mean a variety of fruits and vegetables, a variety of protein sources. Don’t stick to just chicken for the rest of your life; you want to incorporate other sources because they all have different nutrients.”

Hair is made from a protein called keratin, so meals that include protein are vital for vibrant curls. “We need enough protein in our diet to get enough keratin to have healthy hair,” says Warrick. “Protein sources are also where you can get your B vitamins and iron, which are both essential for proper cell function. Without that, your cells won’t be able to create beautiful hair.”

Dairy, fish, and lean meat are good sources of protein, but plant-based proteins like nuts, seeds, peas, whole grains, beans, and soy are effective as well. Warrick also emphasizes the value of eating a broad range of fruits and vegetables. “There’s not one single variety of food that will salvage your hair health or your health in general, but each color of fruits and vegetables has an individual, unique job,” she says.

## Consider supplements

For curly girls seeking solutions beyond their daily meal plan, the beauty industry offers endless supplements in the form of pills, powders, and drinks. But are they effective?

“Many supplements are marketed as the miracle supplement or the pill that grows long, healthy hair, and that is simply not the case,” says Bates, who loves to educate her clients on the facts about curly hair. “Before spending money on supplements, it’s important to consult a medical professional.”



Teixeira consults for curly hair care brands in the UK and works with the Department for Education in London to oversee the science behind hairdressing courses.

UK-based trichologist and nurse Marta Teixeira agrees that the claims are just marketing. “Zinc, riboflavin, folic acid, vitamin B-12, vitamin E, biotin — all of these vitamins, there’s no scientific evidence that it leads to hair growth,” says Teixeira, citing a 2019 clinical review.

Teixeira, who shares her research-based approach to hair on Instagram in both English (@clinihair.uk) and Portuguese (@miss.curlytips), says the current studies don’t support supplements for people who are generally healthy. She’s concerned that someone who self-treats with supplements may be delaying an actual solution.

“My main concern is maybe someone has a condition like female pattern hair loss or diffuse hair loss, and instead of them trying to find out what the main reason is for that to happen, they waste money on these supplements that might not help at all,” she says.

Michael Gilliatt, a *Curl* Stylist Panelist from San Diego, California, doesn’t mind if her clients try a supplement, although she cautions them that dietary changes only affect new hair as it grows in. “I’m like, give it a try, but also be curious as to the reality of the results,” Gilliatt says. She adds that in 20 years of being a stylist, she has yet to see any supplements provide

notable changes in hair growth.

Warrick is wary to suggest that anyone take supplements without first talking to a medical professional about any nutritional deficiencies. “Beware, because the supplement industry is a billion-dollar industry, so they’ll try to make you think you need something when you may not,” she says.

“Biotin is a popular nutrient in supplement form for hair health, but it’s very rare that you would have a biotin deficiency unless you are undernourished or have a certain medical condition.” And before you try any supplements, Warrick strongly recommends finding products that have been tested for safety by an independent third party like ConsumerLab.com, because nutritional supplements are not subject to approval from the Food and Drug Administration.

### Talk to a doctor

While supplements are not a cure-all, some people do have true vitamin deficiencies. For that group, targeted supplementation prescribed by a medical professional can make a difference. If you’re concerned about a possible deficiency affecting your hair, request a blood test at your next physical or schedule an appointment with a dietitian or trichologist.

Teixeira says that people with rare cases of biotin deficiency do see some additional hair growth when adding a biotin supplement, but she also warns that, for healthy people, taking biotin can have a negative impact on routine blood tests for cardiovascular health or hormone levels. “If you take biotin in excess, it might lead some of your blood tests to have different results from what they are supposed to,” she says.

People with anemia also may benefit from supplements. Teixeira explains that someone with anemia might think their hair is thinning permanently when it’s actually a temporary condition called telogen effluvium. “It’s a condition that, as soon as you start taking the right supplements, the iron supplements, it should resolve itself,” Teixeira says.

Gradual changes in hair thickness are common as people age. But if you notice a sudden, drastic change in your hair that’s not related to a major health event like giving birth or having surgery, then seek medical advice. A nutritionist, dermatologist, or trichologist can conduct a specialized exam to determine the cause of the problem.

Bates suggests her salon clients explore additional help when they experience hair loss, an itchy scalp, or dandruff. “Whenever clients come to me with these symptoms, I highly recommend they seek medical attention with a board-certified dermatologist to get a professional diagnosis,” she says.

Teixeira also recommends that anyone concerned about hair loss seek medical help. “If you feel like you have extreme hair loss, if you’re worried about the amount of hair that’s coming out in the shower, if you feel like your hair is getting a bit thinner, if you’re starting to see more of your scalp, then you need to be assessed by a health care professional,” she says.

In Teixeira’s experience, thinning hair often has causes other than nutrition. If one of her clients has concerns, she’ll conduct blood tests to assess what’s happening in each individual case. “That’s why I don’t like to say, ‘Take B-12 and your hair will be completely healthy!’” says Teixeira. “We need to see who’s in front of us, what’s their story, what’s happening, what are their concerns.” A personalized exam will help each person receive the right treatment quickly.

In addition to blood tests, nutrition-focused physical exams can reveal possible deficiencies. Warrick says nutritionists are trained to spot certain telltale signs. “If you have corkscrew hair, you might have a vitamin C deficiency,” she says, referring to the growth of hair on the body, not the scalp. “Or if your hair is easily plucked with no pain, you may have a protein deficiency.”

If you struggle with disordered eating, seeking treatment from a nutritionist or mental health professional can have additional benefits for your hair. “A lot of time with disordered eating, your thoughts are preoccupied with food and your body or exercise,” says Warrick, who currently works in a counseling center. “So if your body is under that stress, whether it be overexercising or overthinking about each meal, that stress can attack your hair. And with disordered eating, if you are restricting your food intake and you’re having deficiencies in your diet, that can lead to hair loss.”

### Be realistic

Patience is required when making dietary modifications to improve hair health. Hair generally grows a half inch to an inch a month, so visible change will take a while. And there are certain factors that can’t be controlled, no matter how well someone eats: genetics and aging.

“I recommend people be conservative in their expectations of how quickly results with their hair will change if they make different choices with their lifestyle,” says Bates, who sees hair health as a balance between genetics and nutrition.



Gilliatt often speaks with clients who fret about their hair being thinner than when they were in their teens or 20s. She's honest with them about the effects of age. "I don't want to be the bearer of bad news, but if you're in your 40s, it can be different than it was in your 20s. It's not just your hair, right? It's everything," she says.

A healthy, balanced diet will help you grow healthy hair. But it won't alter your curl pattern, get rid of frizz, or change what you inherited from your family. Marketing from the beauty industry is set up to tell consumers that everything can be improved. But does your hair need to be improved?

"Don't buy into that there's something wrong with you," Gilliatt urges, adding that a healthy lifestyle of nutrition, good sleep, and exercise is the key. "If we're doing all those things, then maybe what we have to do is move into self-acceptance of what we have and what we are," she says. Ultimately, instead of hoping for a miracle pill or instant diet change to grow "better" hair, we should celebrate that our hair is just right, just the way it is.



"We need to remember that we can't change the rate hair grows," says Teixeira, a member of the International Association of Trichologists. "Hair grows half an inch to an inch per month. We find these supplements saying that it makes your hair grow faster, and genetically that's not possible. It's a marketing strategy."

## STIR UP A HEALTHY MEAL



Nutritionist Christine Warrick shares her favorite meal ideas on Instagram (@stines\_cuisine). Here's one of her healthy recipes:

### CHICKEN CAULIFLOWER STIR-FRY

1 pack of Trader Joe's frozen brown rice  
 1 bag of Trader Joe's riced cauliflower stir-fry  
 1 pack of fresh chicken breasts, sliced into smaller pieces  
 2 tbsp. of toasted sesame oil  
 10 oz. of baby bella mushrooms  
 1 bag of shredded cabbage  
 Coconut aminos  
 Sriracha sauce

1. In a pan greased with sesame oil, cook chicken on medium heat for about 7 minutes or until cooked through.
2. Add the mushrooms and the frozen cauliflower rice to the pan. Combine with chicken and heat for 6-7 minutes, stirring frequently. Add more sesame oil if needed.
3. Reduce heat to low. Place the frozen brown rice in the microwave and cook according to the box instructions. Once the brown rice is cooked, add it to the pan and mix it in.
4. Add a splash of coconut aminos and stir the mixture for 1-2 more minutes.
5. Serve finished stir-fry on a bed of cabbage with a drizzle of Sriracha sauce on top.

## DISORDERED EATING: WHEN TO SEEK HELP

Many people struggle with their relationship with food, even if they don't have a clinical diagnosis like anorexia or bulimia. Disordered eating can involve a wide spectrum of behaviors, affecting people of any gender, body size, race, or ethnicity.

"If more than 50% of your thoughts during the day revolve around food, exercise, or your body, that may indicate that you could have disordered eating, and you may benefit from seeking help," says Christine Warrick, a dietitian with Nurtured Soul Counseling and Wellness. "It's often overlooked in many people due to the stigma that white, thin females are the only ones who fall into the categories of eating disorders. Know that it's still valid for you to seek help and that many insurance companies cover nutrition care."

These behaviors may indicate that someone struggles with disordered eating:

- Restricting food groups (for example, cutting out dairy or gluten for non-allergy reasons)
- Fasting
- Bingeing
- Overexercising

- Body checking (mirror checks, weighing, or taking measurements multiple times per day)
- Fearing weight gain

Disordered eating can cause multiple side effects, such as GI disturbances, amenorrhea (the absence of a menstrual period), irritability, social isolation, and a decline in performance at work or school. Warrick recommends that those seeking help find a dietitian or therapist in a weight-inclusive practice that specializes in eating disorders. IntuitiveEating.org and EDReferral.com both offer directories of counselors who can help.

Additional resources include:

- *Intuitive Eating* by Evelyn Tribole and Elyse Resch
- *Anti-Diet* by Christy Harrison
- *Food Psych* podcast with Christy Harrison

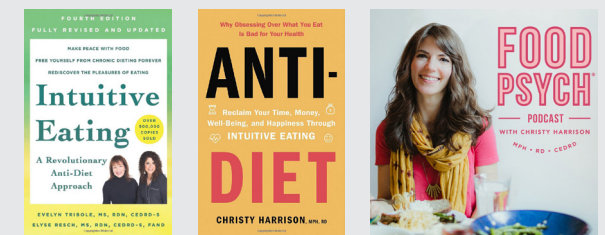


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