

Don't Sweat Your Hair Out: The Frequency of Exercise for African American Women with Natural Hair

Original Research

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Abstract

Introduction: Within the past decade, a *Natural Hair Movement* has emerged in African American female communities which focuses on discontinuing toxic chemical use on the hair as a means to promote health behaviors, like exercise.

Methods: This study investigated exercise behaviors of a sample of 144 African American women with natural hair, ranging from 18-71 years of age. Participants answered questions about the frequency of moderate and vigorous-intensity exercise recommended by the American college of Sports Medicine.

Results: Although the sample identified chemical-free hair care choices and motivation to lose weight, only 15% engaged in exercise. There was a significant negative relationship between weight and frequency of vigorous-intensity exercise ($r=-0.173$; $p<0.05$).

Conclusions: The findings suggest that populations of African American women with natural hair are mindful of the need to lose weight, yet the greatest percentages of participants reported that they did not engage in any exercise.

Key Words: physical activity, appearance, ethnicity

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Introduction

African American women are suffering from preventable diseases that could be addressed through increased exercise.¹ However, hair straightening behavior has surfaced as a road block toward vigorous exercise for African American women because of the coiling impact of sweat on their straightened hair.¹⁻² Within the last decade, hair care has emerged as a variable for public health researchers to investigate the exercise habits of African American girls and women.³⁻⁴ These research studies suggest that African American women are not exercising because of their hair care,⁵ and not addressing the recommended need for “moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity for a minimum of 30 min on five days each week or vigorous-intensity aerobic activity for a minimum of 20 min on three days each week.”⁶ Hair is a meaningful variable for people of African descent because the public presentation of hair is intertwined with identity, self-esteem, culture, systems of oppression, and attractiveness.⁷ A Western standard of beauty in long straight hair, marketed and enforced by social structures of American society, has positioned African American women to make a choice between the maintenance of straightened hair and physical health.⁸

The *Natural Hair Movement* is a counter-narrative to chemical hair straightening which centralizes natural hair as a means to correct toxic health behaviors within African American female communities.⁹ Natural hair is hair that has not been chemically altered by a hair relaxer, texturizer, or perm.¹⁰ Natural hair care became mainstreamed in the 1960s during the Civil Rights Movement and re-emerged in the late 2000s.⁹ The recent increase in the number of African American women engaging in natural hair care practices (30% of African American women not chemically straightening their hair) has been entitled the *Natural Hair Movement*.⁹ Psychologists have found that African American women who choose to wear their hair

naturally report higher rates of self-efficacy in comparison to African American women who engage in chemical hair straightening.⁹⁻¹¹ Further, “to wear natural African American hair is a political act within itself, since depending on the environment such hair may be deemed socially and politically unacceptable.”⁷ This movement recognizes that African American women have engaged in chemical hair-altering behaviors as a condition of forced conformity within systems of oppression dating back to the start of enslavement.⁹ Adewumi and Flint found that this gendered norm for African American women and girls exposes them to chemicals in hair straightening products that irritate the skin and eyes, cause respiratory disorders, disrupt the metabolism and endocrine system, cause uterine fibroids, cancer, and produce the early onset of puberty.¹⁰ Members of the *Natural Hair Movement* thereby argue that hair straightening mandates complex consequences, such as major financial cost, investment of time, exposure to toxic chemicals, and limits physical activity for African American women and girls.⁵

Hair care may be admissible as a framework to investigate exercise behaviors for diverse groups of African American women. *The Natural Hair Movement* is empowering African American women to make healthier lifestyle choices, through increased exercise, sleep hygiene, and eating healthy.¹² Members of the natural hair community provide support and direct education-driven health advice to each other in-person and through social media.¹³⁻¹⁴ Wearing natural hairstyles, such as braids and cornrows, have been identified by African American women as a way to increase the frequency and intensity of exercise behaviors.¹⁻² As articulated by Versey,⁵ “wearing natural hair does not ensure participation in exercise; however, natural hair may require less maintenance and might contribute to an increased general awareness about healthy behaviors.” Thus, this research study queried the frequency and intensity of exercise behaviors of African American women with natural hair to emplace contemporary public health dialogue on physical activity within body politics.

Methods

This study used data that originates from a mixed-methods research project to assess the relationship between hair care and health behaviors. To foster the cultural authenticity of the survey, we recruited participants from African American beauty salons. Participants, therefore included cosmetologists and patrons. Participants utilized iPads or cell phones to complete the self-administered survey on the Survey Monkey link. Research assistants were available to address any concerns with technology and answer questions about clarifying survey questions. These research assistants received five hours of research training to standardize recruitment of participants and responses to participant questions.

Participants

Participants from the mixed-methods research study were included in this research study if they identified as African American or Black, female, were at least 18 years old, and reported non-chemically processed natural hair. 144 participants fit the inclusion criteria out of the 324 participants. The selected participants ranged from 18-71 years old, with a mean of age of 33.96, education completed ranged from high school diploma (23.1%) to professional degree (32.9%), and most resided in the Mid-Atlantic region (56.8%) of the United States. The participants ranged from not having used chemicals in the hair within a few months to not having done so for over 10 years. University Institutional Review Board approved of the research study. All participants gave written informed consent. Data were collected from February 2017 to February 2018. Participants were compensated by being entered into a raffle to win one of ten \$20 gift cards to Amazon.com.

Protocol

Participants self-reported demographic information, choice to use or not use chemicals to straighten hair, their weight and height, and also answered a range of health behavior questions about exercise, such as:

On how many of the past seven days did you do moderate-intensity cardio or aerobic exercise (caused a noticeable increase in heart rate, such as a brisk walk) for at least 30 minutes?

On how many of the past seven days did you do vigorous-intensity cardio or aerobic exercise (caused large increases in breathing or heart rate, such as jogging) for at least 20 minutes?

These questions are a direct reflection of the public health standards for physical activity. Haskell et al.⁶ articulated the physical activity recommendations of the American College of Sports Medicine, American Heart Association, and Center for Disease Control and Prevention, “to promote and maintain health, all healthy adults aged 18–65 yrs. need moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity for a minimum of 30 min on five days each week or vigorous-intensity aerobic activity for a minimum of 20 min on three days each week.”

Statistical Analysis

The data was analyzed using the IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS) 23.0. The descriptive statistics of the participants were calculated for the types of exercise through frequency of exercise for African American women with natural hair. Multiple Pearson’s correlations were assessed for moderate and vigorous exercise frequency with age and weight. Also, BMI was calculated from the self-reported heights and weights of the study participants.

Results

According to self-reports of height (M=64.37 inches) and weight (M=165.33 lbs) produced the following BMI data: 4% were categorized as underweight, 30% fit within the normal range, 27% were categorized as overweight, and 39% met the criteria for obesity. This suggests that 66% of the participants had a BMI over 25, which places them at risk for various diseases. Seventy-one percent of the participants identified the motivation to lose weight.

Over the past week, 85% of the participants did not reach the recommended moderate-intensity recommendation of 30-minutes for five days a week (see Table 1). The data suggests that 25% of participants did not engage in any moderate-intensity cardio exercise (see Table 1). A third of participants reported moderate-intensity exercise for one to two days per week, while slightly lower than a third of participants engaged in moderate cardio three to four days per week (see Table 1). Further, 12.6% engaged in the recommended moderate cardio five days per week and 3% exceeded the recommendation with moderate-intensity exercise for six or seven days in the week (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Self-Reported Moderate-Intensity Exercise Behaviors for African American Women with Natural Hair (n=144)*

EXERCISE BEHAVIOR	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
NO MODERATE EXERCISE	36	25.2
MODERATE EXERCISE 1 DAY A WEEK	26	18.2
MODERATE EXERCISE 2 DAYS A WEEK	19	13.3
MODERATE EXERCISE 3 DAYS A WEEK	27	18.9
MODERATE EXERCISE 4 DAYS A WEEK	13	9.1
MODERATE EXERCISE 5 DAYS A WEEK	18	12.6
MODERATE EXERCISE 6 DAYS A WEEK	3	2.1
MODERATE EXERCISE 7 DAYS A WEEK	1	.7

During the course of the week, 76% of participants did not achieve the frequency of vigorous-intensity aerobic activity. The largest group, 52.8% of the participants, reported that they did not engage in any vigorous-intensity physical activity during the past seven days, 12.5% reported one day of vigorous-intensity activity, 10.4% reported two days of vigorous-intensity, and yet 24.4% met the recommendation of exercising at the vigorous-intensity level for at least three days or more a week (see Table 2). The frequency of vigorous-intensity exercise declined with the increase of days (see Table 2). No person in the entire study exercised at the vigorous level daily during the seven-day period (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Self-Reported Vigorous-Intensity Exercise Behaviors for African American Women with Natural Hair (n=144)*

EXERCISE BEHAVIOR	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
NO VIGOROUS EXERCISE	76	52.8
VIGOROUS EXERCISE 1 DAY A WEEK	18	12.5
VIGOROUS EXERCISE 2 DAYS A WEEK	15	10.4
VIGOROUS EXERCISE 3 DAYS A WEEK	16	11.1
VIGOROUS EXERCISE 4 DAYS A WEEK	9	6.3
VIGOROUS EXERCISE 5 DAYS A WEEK	7	4.9
VIGOROUS EXERCISE 6 DAYS A WEEK	3	2.1
VIGOROUS EXERCISE 7 DAYS A WEEK	0	0

There was a significant negative relationship between weight and frequency of vigorous-intensity exercise ($r = -0.173$; $p < 0.05$). There was a low negative relationship between weight and frequency of moderate-intensity exercise ($r = -0.133$). There was no significant relationship between age and frequency of exercise, with moderate ($r = 0.061$) having a positive and vigorous-intensity ($r = -0.94$) exercise holding a stronger negative correlation.

Discussion

This is the first research study to identify the frequency of moderate-intensity and vigorous-intensity exercise of exclusively African American women with natural hair. The findings suggest that populations of African American women with natural hair are mindful of the need to lose weight, yet the greatest percentages of participants reported that they did not engage in any exercise. This data aligns with existing research where most African American women do not comply with the recommended 30 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity five days a week, or vigorous-intensity aerobic activity for 20 minutes three days a week for health maintenance.⁵ In this sample of African American women with natural hair, we can assume that there must be other barriers to exercise outside of the maintenance of chemically straightened hair. Other factors may come into play, like self-discipline and financial factors.⁸ While ceasing chemical use on the hair can indicate a health behavior choice, it does not indicate frequency and intensity of exercise. The data suggests that African American with natural hair have higher rates of low perspiration activities, like a brisk walk, but lower rates in high perspiration activities like running. Weight appeared to be the most significant distinction in exercise intensity and frequency in this sample. Natural hair choice does not mean that African American women can afford costly gym memberships or have additional time in their schedules to lift weights.

African American women with natural hair do not have a universal experience with hair care techniques and health behaviors.¹⁵⁻¹⁶ The natural hair varies in texture and length, and people of African descent have the broadest phenotypic expression of hair.¹⁵ The reasons why African American women have chosen to wear natural hair vary greatly.¹⁶ Indeed, many African American women who choose to wear natural hair engage in temporary heat straightening processes to have a public presentation of chemically straightened hair.¹⁶

The findings of this research study are relevant to health care providers and researchers because more sophisticated health programs need to be developed to negotiate the nuances of the meaning of hair and hair care within African American women's lives. Ideally, hair care professionals should collaborate with researchers and health professionals to address the culturally-relevant health behaviors related to hair.¹⁷ For example, health coaching, free exercise classes, and other health programs can be offered in African American hair care settings.¹⁷ We were able to identify that natural hair can be worn while engaging in a variety of physical activity, but in order to facilitate African American women's participation in physical activity, health promotion should further align with their hair care processes.

Media-Friendly Summary

African American women tend to avoid exercise to prevent sweat from messing up their chemically straightened hairstyles. However, a Natural Hair Movement has emerged in the last decade that encourages African American women to forgo straight hair and to wear their natural hair texture as a means to promote a healthy physical lifestyle. In this study, 162 African American women with natural hair were surveyed about the frequency of moderate and vigorous exercise. This study suggests that although African American women have made a transition in their appearance, most are not exercising at the frequency to prevent health issues.

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