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beauty Q & A

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Q Cold weather makes my hair totally flat and flyaway. What can I do to prevent this?

A A buildup of static electricity—the culprit here—can make even the lushest locks go limp, according to stylist Christopher Downs of Louis Licari Color Group, NYC. His suggestion? "Avoid overdrying your hair with a blowdryer; instead, leave it just slightly damp and cold to the touch." Unlined wool hats contribute to the problem, too, since they cause the friction that generates static; wearing a colorful silk scarf under your hat can help.

There are also several styling tricks you might try to combat the flyaways: For *straight hair*, the key is to control static without weighing down hair. Spritz a flat brush (one that combines natural and synthetic bristles, such as Mason Pearson's) with hairspray to help smooth unruly locks. Or, fill a spray bottle with water plus two tablespoons of conditioner; mist it on *before* blowdrying to reduce static and to detangle. (Or try Regis Pro-Fusion Plus Conditioner.) Slicking on a quarter-sized dollop of sculpting lotion from roots to ends can also help by giving hair a light yet protective coating (Paul Mitchell's Sculpting Lotion is a good choice). To help control *wavy or curly hair*, work a small amount of conditioner into clean, towel-dried tresses to seal in moisture and help maintain body. Another possibility: Nonaerosol hairspray such as Clairol's Final Net—applied to damp hair—will boost shine and texture while minimizing static.

Q Whenever I do sit-ups, my lower back starts to hurt. Is this the kind of burn I should be feeling?

A No! According to Rebecca Thomas, co-owner of the Molly Fox Studio in NYC, such discomfort usually stems from performing sit-ups incorrectly. Pain occurs when you don't keep the spine pressed firmly to the floor, and it can be exacerbated by too tight muscles or a greater-than-normal arch in the back. Ward off achiness by beginning every exercise session with a stretch designed to promote flexibility—try lying on your back and hugging knees to the chest, holding until muscles feel relaxed. Other wise precautions during sit-ups: • Keep

knees bent and feet flat on the floor, as close to the body as possible. • If back starts to arch, either cross ankles or raise your feet one foot off the ground. • As you lift head and shoulders, concentrate on shortening the distance between the hipbones and the bottom of your rib cage (imagining the abdomen getting shorter and thinner). Or consider these variations on the sit-up; they put less stress on the back. *The Isometric Hold*: Lie on back with knees bent and lower spine pressed into the floor. Raising head, neck and shoulders, grasp thighs and pull the upper body up as far as possible. Then place hands on stomach (or behind the head for greater difficulty) and hold for five seconds before slowly rolling back to starting position. Repeat ten times, gradually increasing the number of repetitions as muscles get stronger. *Leg Raises*: Lie on back with hands at your sides on the floor. Contract stomach muscles to push spine into the ground, then raise legs two or three inches off the floor. Repeat 10 times, working up to 20. Note: If pain persists even after you've tried these moves, consult your doctor.

Q I love to wear big, inexpensive earrings, but they often irritate the skin around my ears and neck. What's the problem here?

A Many people are sensitive to metal jewelry and can experience uncomfortable, even painful reactions that may also cause skin in the surrounding area to turn black or greenish. "This is usually due to an allergy to nickel, a common component of costume jewelry," explains Paul Lazar, M.D., professor of clinical dermatology at Northwestern University Medical School in Chicago. Because nickel is very durable and easy to work with, it's often combined with other metals to form a jewelry base, then electroplated with a thin layer of real silver or gold. (Note, though, that trace amounts may also be found in more pricey baubles.) The trouble starts when the earring's surface scratches or corrodes, allowing the moisture in your body to draw out the nickel and trigger a chemical reaction that leads to a rash.

The best remedy is to look for jewelry made from surgical steel or platinum, both of which are hypoallergenic; use

caution when selecting, however—some earrings are labeled hypoallergenic even though only the post truly is. If flare-ups still occur, try covering the jewelry with a protective coating. Clear nail polish is one option, but it contains ingredients that may be equally irritating. A better choice: a transparent, hypoallergenic glaze—such as Hypo-Shield (from Fashion Solutions U.S.A., Ashland, MA), available in department stores and drugstores—that brushes on as a sealant. Treat every surface that comes in contact with skin, including earring backs as well as the posts themselves.

Q I'm flying south for a winter vacation—which means wearing a bathing suit for the first time in months. How can I shape up quickly?

A Chances are, cold weather has kept you indoors and less active lately, so you'll need a highly focused plan to get back on the fitness track. For the speediest toning results, Lisa Deragon of the Plus One Fitness Clinic, NYC, recommends a 20- to 30-minute aerobic regimen performed three times a week (such as riding a stationary bicycle or following a workout video), combined with a set of exercises specifically targeted for the buttock muscles. Three good moves to try: *Lunges*: Standing with feet together, step forward with the right leg, bending the right knee and lowering the left knee almost to the floor. Then push straight up to a standing position (feet together), holding the buttocks in tightly. Do 15 to 20 on each side. *Step-Ups*: Using stairs, a bench or low chair, step up with the right leg. Bring left leg up to meet it, lifting your body off the ground rather than pushing off. Step down and repeat 15 to 20 times, then switch sides. *Extensions*: On hands and knees, extend the right leg straight out behind you with the foot flexed; raise—don't swing—your leg as high as possible without allowing back to arch; bend the knee and draw it into your chest. Repeat 20 times, then switch sides. Note: Add weights to increase resistance as these exercises become easier.

Have a beauty question? Send it to Beauty Q & A, Mademoiselle, 350 Madison Ave., NY, NY 10017. (Sorry, we can't answer letters individually.)

