

MAIL TODAY

DON'T COMB TOO MUCH

(Many healthy habits have the potential to turn into unhealthy ones so read on if you want to avoid this)

By RITUPARNA MUKHERJEE

CULTIVATING good health habits is one of the simplest ways of staying healthy. Brushing our teeth after meals can prevent endless trips to the dentist, just as devoting 30 minutes a day to exercising can keep us fit well into the ripe old years. Sometimes, however, we can actually go overboard on "good habits". Here is the lowdown on some healthy habits that have the potential to become unhealthy.

TOO MUCH COMBING

THE idea that frequent combing or oiling of the hair can improve its quality is actually misguided. While several women wish for Rapunzel-esque tresses, not all of us are gifted with naturally strong healthy hair. In fact it would actually stay in better shape if we did not fuss with it. Oiling the hair too often does not in itself help the hair to grow. It's the head massage rather than the oil that encourages blood flow in the scalp, stimulating the hair follicles. "Excess of oil on the scalp can actually cause the pores of the scalp to get blocked, resulting in pimples and fungal infections. And if you comb your hair too much — especially tightly curled hair — you risk pulling out healthy hair that is still in its growing stage and is not ready to be shed yet," says Dr Sachin Dhawan, senior consultant dermatologist, Artemis Health Institute.

Moreover, for people who have oily hair, combing activates sebaceous glands to secrete more oil which clogs pores and further damages hair. A recent Israeli study published in the *Journal of Dermatological Treatment* supports this claim. "The women who combed twice a day lost three times more hair than those who combed once a day," said the head of the study Alexander Kirdman of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Combing too frequently can cause damage to the hair shaft which weakens over a period of time thanks to chemicals in shampoos and hair colour causing the hair to break and tear easily.

TOO MUCH TOOTH BRUSHING

THOSE of you who keep on brushing your teeth frequently in the hope of sustaining fresh breath or whitening teeth might want to reconsider. Less may be more when it comes to brushing your teeth. Studies have shown that applying more than a light amount of pressure to your teeth or brushing longer than two minutes doesn't make them any cleaner

and may in fact increase the risk of oral health problems. "Brushing too hard or for too long can damage the protective enamel on your teeth or irritate the gums and cause other oral health problems. When it comes to brushing teeth the important aspect is technique and not force," says Dr Payal Nayar, consultant dental surgeon, Max Healthcare. Overzealous brushing involves excess force being applied on the teeth which will eventually slough off the enamel and expose the nerves of the teeth making them extremely sensitive. Hard brushes, abrasive tooth powder and incorrect brushing can lead to serious problems in later life.

Apart from the damage to the enamel, excess brushing can lead to small cuts at the neck of the teeth — where it meets the gums — causing pain and infection. Cleaning the tongue with sharp metal cleaners is another mistake people make. The tongue is made up of extremely delicate tissue and houses the taste buds on its surface which is damaged by the sharpness of tongue cleaners. Even though brushes are available with rubber — and therefore softer — cleaners on the back of the heads, constant friction on the surface of the tongue will cause irritation and sometimes nodules. Traditional notions of using lemon, salt and alum to clean the teeth hoping to make them whiter is a bad idea, since this will only damage the enamel and cause corrosion over a period of time. Salt especially is a bad idea as it can actually burn the soft tissue of the gums.

TOO MANY VITS

MANY think that popping endless numbers of supplementary pills is the answer to their health problems. Granted that the food we eat today does not supply us with all the necessary vitamins and minerals, but it is still best to consult a doctor before randomly popping

vitamin and other nutritional supplements. These are not harmless as imagined, and have to be taken in a certain way for a certain period of time. Taking them randomly can lead to serious repercussions. Some antioxidants and vitamins are fat soluble and not water soluble which means they get accumulated in the body. "Intake of excess vitamin and calcium supplements can cause hypervitaminosis and hypercalcaemia — both which cause skin and hair problems. This is ironic since people pop these pills expecting the quality of their skin and hair to improve," says Rakesh Gupta, senior consultant internal medicine, Apollo Hospital.

TOO LITTLE SALT

BALANCE is key where salt is concerned. Too much of it can be bad for the health as it raises the blood pressure, increasing susceptibility to stroke and cardiac problems. People tend to reduce their salt intake because of this. What they don't realise is that consuming too little salt can lead to seri-

ous health repercussions as well. "Low sodium intake in normal people could lead to body aches, cramps, exhaustion, giddiness and low BP" says Dr S P Byotra, internal medicine specialist, Sir Gangaram hospital. Low salt intake can also result in hyponatraemia, a condition which occurs when the body's salt levels get diluted, and fall below normal. When this happens, the condition can lead to cardiac arrest or swelling of the brain cells and can also result in a coma. Salt plays an essential role in regulation of fluids, helps with nerve and muscle function and maintaining blood pressure. Go slow on the salt shaker only if a medical condition requires it or a doctor recommends a diet that is low in salt. "A healthy person requires a basic amount of salt (10-15 gms/day) and should not go on a low salty diet," says Dr Byotra.

TOO MUCH EXERCISE

EXERCISE is supposed to energise you. At the end of it if you feel exhausted, listen to your body, and stop. You are probably over-exercising and leave alone carving yourself a great body; it could leave you totally ill. According to research by The American College of Sports Medicine, over-training can eventually lower the desire to exercise, and even increase the risk of illness, lowering the body's ability to fight infection. "This is because the body is always in a state of repair, so it won't be able to fight an external infection," says Dr Rajesh Malhotra, professor of orthopedics, AIIMS. He says, even a morning walk or a jog is not



without risk. This coupled with another healthy habit — walking up and down stairs can actually cause osteoarthritis of the knee instead of preventing it. "When you are walking up the stairs you are placing seven times your body weight on your kneecap. So people who have a family history of osteoarthritis should abstain from using the stairs deliberately to exercise," says Dr Malhotra. "Over doing an exercise regime can cause a lot of stress related injuries. With stretching exercises one could strain muscles, tear ligaments and injure tissues too. The most common injuries seen are stress fractures, which are extremely painful hairline breaks. Sit ups etc can harm the spine and neck," says Vikas Kumar Singh, fitness instructor, Powerhouse Health Club. Moreover, bones need to be strengthened gradually over time. "Bones that are too weak to take the strain of repetitive exercise can split in as little as two or three weeks," he adds. "Never work out so much that you feel completely exhausted at the end of it. About 45 minutes to an hour, four to five days a week, should be the limit. Your workout should leave you feeling fresh and energetic."

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RUDE HEALTH

EVEN in the dark, we can locate our partner's lips for a kiss. U.S. researchers have identified the brain cells that deal with sensation and visual awareness, activated when viewing an object close to the face in daylight. These continue their activity even in darkness.