From Brunette to Blonde: Can Your Hair Color Get Lighter Naturally?

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Thanks to the beauty-obsessed users of Reddit, we've discovered unusual makeup tips, the best of the best in micellar waters, and some try-at-your-own-risk skin-care hacks. But when we came across a thread discussing one user's experience with their hair color

changing from dark brown to blonde naturally, we were somewhat perplexed. Sure, hair gets a tad lighter when exposed to the sun or if you go the artificial route with a salon visit, but one user writes, "My hair and my beard are both black, my beard started changing to blonde some years ago, and it's still in the process, and 2 months ago my hair too started changing to blonde. Why is this happening? So many questions." We have so many questions, too.

While we're unfamiliar with the specifics of the Reddit user's case, New York City facial plastic surgeon Yael Halaas breaks down the basics: Our natural hair color is determined by the production of cells called melanocytes."[Melanocytes] travel into the hair bulb as hair follicles develop in utero. They generate the pigment that is incorporated into growing hair fibers in order to produce hair in an array of natural shades," she says. "Accordingly, the darker a person's natural hair color is, the more individual hair follicles they have on their scalp." Going a bit further, Halaas explains that two types of melanin play a significant role in hair color. "Eumelanins are brown and black pigments, and pheomelanins are red and yellow pigments. Variations in the ratio of these pigments can produce a large number of hair colors and tones. Additionally, levels of melanin can vary over time causing a person's hair color to change."

Lars Skjoth, scientist founder of hair-loss treatment company Harklinikken, treats patients for hair loss and has seen this particular hair-color shift with one of his clients. "It is rare for hair to change color from black or brown to blonde, however, it happens," he says. "Changes in hair color can be attributed to a loss of integrity to the hair, likely due to an imbalance at the root or follicle — essentially, as the quality of your hair declines, melanin production can reduce, causing hair to lighten and become more transparent." So what causes the quality of our hair and melanin production to deteriorate? According to Halaas and Skjoth, there are a variety of reasons.

"We unsurprisingly put our hair through a lot: heat from straightening and curling tools, chemicals in styling products, chlorine from pools, [and beyond]. All of these things affect the keratin in your hair, making your natural hair lighter," says Halaas. "Malnutrition such as a vitamin deficiency can cause hair to become dull and lackluster, in which case it can appear lighter," says Skjoth. Halaas adds, "Certain drugs such as those to prevent malaria can lighten hair, while some epilepsy medications can darken it. High levels of estrogen and progesterone, which are produced during pregnancy, can also play a role in darkening your hair."

This leads us back to eumelanin, the black and brown pigment that gives brunettes their gorgeous hair color. Essentially, when the production of eumelanin slows down, so does the shade of brown you were born with, causing hair to lighten naturally. So is there a way to naturally restore our hair's original hue without having to dye it?

"That's the million-dollar question," says Halaas.