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The Taming of the Curl

With 'Beach Waves' the New Ideal, Hair Salons and Products Sell Women on More Ways to De-Frizz

By ANJALI ATHAVALEY

Fear of frizzy curls has taken hold in salons across America.



Whatever happened to curly hair? And do some curly-haired professional women feel corporate pressure to lower the volume on their rambunctious hair? Anjali Athavaley has details.

Whether upscale or mass-market, salons and hair-care products are selling women on the idea that straight hair can be theirs. The desired look is called "beach waves," a smooth coif with movement, shine and bounce but no frizzy curls. It's easier to achieve for most women than the extreme, pin-straight look of several years ago, which replaced wild, curling tendrils as the beauty ideal.

"It's the look that's on the celebrity, the long, loose beachy wave," says Brad Masterson, spokesman for the Professional Beauty Association, which represents the salon and spa industries.

Among the most popular straightening techniques are keratin treatments, also known as Brazilian keratin treatments, which straighten hair with a flat iron and coat hair cuticles with keratin protein to add shine and improve strength. The treatments cost from \$250 to \$600 and keep hair frizz-free for anywhere from six to 12 weeks.

Five Steps to Straighter Hair

A two-hour keratin treatment at AKS Salon, New York, gave Nina Glucksman silky, straight hair.



Mimi Ritzen Crawford for The Wall Street Journal

Nina Glucksman, 33, of Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, before her straightening treatment



Some image consultants say professional women with lots of curls often feel pressured to tame them for work. "The women who have the power spots in banking and hedge funds and all of that never wear their hair to extremes," says Susan Sommers, a New York business-image coach who has advised employees at companies including Deloitte and Colgate-Palmolive Co. Their hair isn't too straight, too long or too curly. "People who are being groomed for high potential, and people who are handling a lot of money, have overseers who really understand that they can't look unkempt or ungroomed," she says.

Some keratin treatments, including the popular brand Brazilian Blowout, have come under scrutiny by state regulators concerned about formaldehyde, a suspected carcinogen, found in tests of both products and the air during the process. The Food and Drug Administration has received reports of eye irritation, headaches,



Mimi Ritzen Crawford for The Wall Street Journal

To start, Sadah Saltzman washes Ms. Glucksman's hair. She tells her not to wash it again for 24 hours.



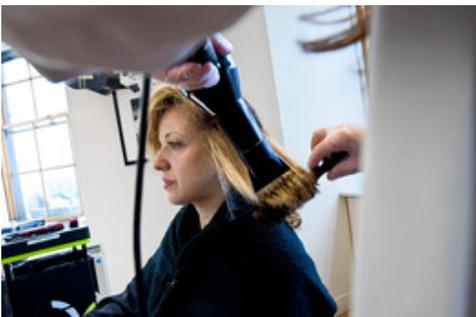
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Ms. Glucksman's naturally curly hair is brushed and divided into sections, secured with clips.



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Keratin treatment solution is applied with a spray bottle to coat the hair, section by section.



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The hair is blow-dried as stylist Ms. Saltzman brushes it straight using a round brush.



breathing problems, rashes and fainting among salon workers. It is looking at whether hair-straightening products or ingredients are likely to cause health problems.

Last August, Procter & Gamble Co. pulled Brazilian Blowout products from its Frédéric Fekkai salons after the company's own tests showed they contained formaldehyde, a P&G spokesman says. Last year, the Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Division found average formaldehyde levels of 8% or more in two products in the Brazilian Blowout line—far exceeding the agency's 0.1% threshold for disclosure of the ingredient. Exposure to formaldehyde, classified by the Environmental Protection Agency as a suspected carcinogen, can result in eye, nose and upper respiratory irritation. The Oregon regulators concluded that the treatments present "meaningful risks" to salon workers.

Brazilian Blowout says its products are safe. Mike Brady, chief executive of the Los Angeles company, says they contain methylene glycol, which is formaldehyde that has reacted with water, not formaldehyde per se. And he points to a portion of the Oregon study in which air samples from seven salons during treatment with the Brazilian Blowout Acai solution indicated permissible exposure levels. The company has launched Brazilian Blowout Zero, a product it says is free of both formaldehyde and methylene glycol.

The Personal Care Products Council, an industry group, says formaldehyde levels in cosmetic products shouldn't exceed 0.2% and advises consumers getting their hair treated with products containing formaldehyde and methylene glycol to do so only at a well-ventilated salon.

Despite warnings, salon keratin treatments remain widely available. The process typically involves shampooing the hair, applying a chemical solution, blow-drying, then straightening with a flat iron. The chemical solution rearranges proteins in the hair and softens the hair, making ironing more effective. Women, using a blow-dryer at home, can recreate the smooth, straight salon look in less time than it would take with unprocessed hair. Or they can let their hair dry naturally for frizz-free curls.

Last Friday, Nina Glucksman was at Salon AKS in New York, for the Lasio One-Day Keratin treatment. The process took about two hours and cost \$600. "It just takes the frizz out and makes it a prettier curl," says the 33-year-old Brooklyn, N.Y., floral designer. Before getting the treatment, she used to spend an hour straightening her hair with a flat iron; now, she needs less than half an hour. "I love curly hair in theory," she says. "But when it gets too big and the curls are



Mimi Ritzen Crawford for The Wall Street Journal

The hair is again divided into sections. Each section is pulled straight with a hot flat iron.



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Nina Glucksman after her two-hour keratin treatment at AKS

undefined, I just think it looks messy."

Demand for keratin treatments comes in part from women who have defected from chemical "relaxers." Those products, often containing sodium hydroxide, were long targeted to the African-American market. Lisa Jean-Francois, a 28-year-old manager at an educational company, says she was 9 or 10 when she started getting her hair relaxed to make her "kinky curly" hair more manageable; she stopped at 17. "I didn't want to use something that I felt was damaging my hair," says Ms. Jean-Francois, a New Yorker of Haitian descent. More recently, she says, she has begun keratin treatments.

From Curly to Straight

However they did it, these TV characters and performers went from curly to straight.

A salon process known as



Everett Collection

Sarah Jessica Parker in 'Sex and the City,' in 1998

"thermal reconditioning" was popular when the pin-straight look was in. Longer lasting than keratin treatments, the thermal method uses a "reducing agent," like thioglycolic acid, to break hair bonds, followed by an "oxidizing agent," like hydrogen peroxide, to restore them, says Arun Nandagiri, president of Bria Research Labs, of Libertyville, Ill., which develops and tests hair products. The effects last until the treated hair grows out. But enthusiasm for this method has faded: The treatment includes a hair-ironing marathon and typically lasts up to six hours.

Any straightening treatment can damage hair, says Paradi Mirmirani, a dermatologist at the Permanente Medical Group, Vallejo, Calif. With many chemical treatments, "you're breaking and re-forming the bonds in the hair, so you will get damage."

Try This at Home?

Products that promise silky, straight hair when used with heat styling equipment run the gamut of prices.

- Liquid Keratin Inc. says it's the 'first safe, at-home alternative' to salon treatments. ('starter kit,' \$69 liquidkeratin.com).
- Rusk Inc.'s Str8 claims to 'internally straighten' curly, frizzy hair when used before blow-drying (6 oz., \$11.99, Ricky's NYC).
- L'oreal's Kerastase Nutritive Oleo-Relax Serum (125 ml, \$37, kerastase-usa.com) gives 'long-lasting frizz protection' to dry, 'rebellious' hair.
- John Frieda's Frizz-Ease extra-strength serum makes 'unruly frizz' sleek and shiny (1.69 oz., \$8.99, drugstore.com).

Companies are already positioning alternatives to keratin treatments. L'Oreal plans to launch its L'Oreal Professionnel X-Tenso Moisturist straightening treatment in 12 U.S. salon locations next month. The treatment, using thioglycolic acid, takes three to four hours and costs from \$250 to \$500. "When the whole dilemma about formaldehyde came out, X-Tenso became very popular in Europe because salons wanted to find something that's safe," says Alejandro Lopez, general manager of L'Oreal salon products division.

Some proponents of curly hair encourage women to resist straighteners. "We would like to help people embrace their hair," says Michelle Breyer, co-founder and president of NaturallyCurly.com, a site she started

14 years ago that classifies curly hair into four categories and helps women choose haircuts and products. "We hope that if they have texture in their hair, they wouldn't have it straightened. There's a lot of people who feel like that's the only way they're pretty, and we hope that people don't feel that way."

The flexible look resulting from keratin treatments is blurring the line between straight and curly, says Ms. Breyer, who has had keratin treatments. "A lot of people want some predictability."

Write to Anjali Athavaley at anjali.athavaley@wsj.com

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