

## The Definition and Diversity of Curly Hair: A Closer Look at Curvature, Care, and Cultural Significance

Curly hair represents one of the most fascinating expressions of human diversity, not just as a physical trait, but as an element loaded with identity, history, and culture. Its unique structure is the result of a complex combination of genetic, environmental, and even emotional factors that shape curl patterns as varied as the personalities that bear them. To truly understand what defines curly hair, one must delve into the science behind the strands, the classifications that organize them, and the care that keeps them healthy, as well as recognizing the social role they play in different communities around the world.

Curls begin to form in the hair follicle, the microscopic structure in the skin responsible for producing each strand of hair. Unlike straight hair, which grows from perfectly round and symmetrical follicles, curly hair arises from follicles with asymmetrical shapes, often elliptical or even kidney-shaped. This irregularity causes keratin, a protein that makes up the hair fiber, to be distributed unevenly along the strand, creating tension zones that force the hair to curl in on itself. The flatter or more oval the follicle, the tighter the resulting curl, which explains why some curls are wide and loose, while others curl into almost microscopic spirals.

The classification of curls into types and subtypes was popularized by the system created by stylist Beverly Johnson, who categorized hair into four main groups (Type 1 to 4), with subdivisions that reflect degrees of curvature. However, it is important to emphasize that this categorization is not rigid — many individuals have more than one type of curl on their head, a mix that defies standards and requires personalized care. Type 2 hair, for example, is considered wavy, moving between straight and curly. They usually have a soft “S” shape, but can range from barely noticeable waves (2A) to more defined and voluminous waves (2C) that start to curl towards the ends. Type 3, on the other hand, includes the curls themselves, those that form clearly visible spirals from the roots to the ends. Here, the difference between a 3A (wide curls, with a diameter similar to that of a crayon) and a 3C (tight curls, like clotheslines) is noticeable not only in appearance, but also in the need for hydration and styling techniques.

Type 4, often referred to as kinky, is where the curl becomes more compact, with patterns ranging from small, defined spirals (4A) to “Z”-shaped zigzags (4B) or textures so tight that the individual curls are barely discernible to the naked eye (4C). This type of hair, in particular, carries a history of resistance and cultural affirmation, especially in black communities, where curly hair has been — and still is — the target of prejudice and attempts to erase it. The acceptance of natural hair, in this context, has become a political act, a movement that rejects Eurocentric beauty standards and celebrates ancestry.

But the journey of curly hair is not limited to genetics or identity; it also involves an often challenging relationship with daily care. The spiral structure of curls makes it difficult for the natural oils produced by the scalp to travel the entire length of the hair, leaving the ends drier and prone to frizz. For this reason, deep hydration is not only recommended, but essential. Ingredients such as shea butter, coconut oil and aloe vera are powerful allies, capable of replenishing lost moisture without weighing down the hair. The “LCO” (Liquid-Cream-Oil)

technique, for example, is widely used: first, a liquid leave-in is applied to moisten, followed by a defining cream and, finally, an oil to seal in the hydration.

In addition, practices such as "cold finishing" — ending the washing ritual with cold water to close the cuticles and enhance the curls — and the use of fabrics such as silk or satin on pillowcases help to reduce the friction that causes frizz. Choosing products without sulfates, parabens or alcohol is also crucial, as these components can dry out the strands and undo the definition of the curls. Another point that is often overlooked is heat protection: even if the use of diffusers or straighteners is occasional, excessive heat can damage the structure of the curl, causing it to lose its natural shape temporarily — or, in extreme cases, permanently.

Culturally, curly hair has undergone a revolution in recent decades. While straightening and chemical straightening treatments were once seen as "necessary" to fit into a beauty ideal, today movements like the "Curly Girl Method" (which advocates embracing natural hair and eliminating harmful ingredients) have gained millions of followers. Social media has become a platform for sharing hair care routines, tutorials on haircuts specifically for curls (like the "devacut"), and celebrations of hair diversity. This shift isn't just about aesthetics; it's a form of self-acceptance and empowerment, especially for those who grew up being told their hair was "difficult" or "unmanageable."

Ultimately, curly hair is more than a physical characteristic — it's a reflection of the complexity and beauty of human diversity. Every curl tells a story, whether biological, cultural, or personal, and understanding this language is the first step to caring not just for your hair, but for the identity it represents.