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# Getting a Greener Clean: Shampoo

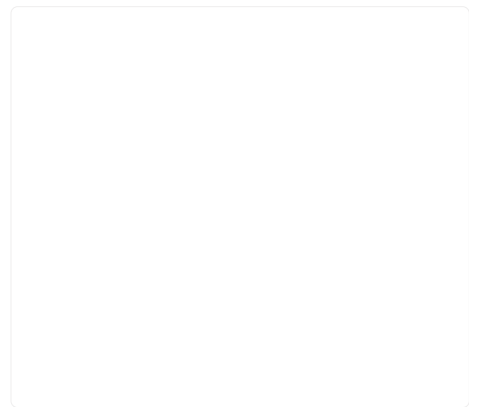
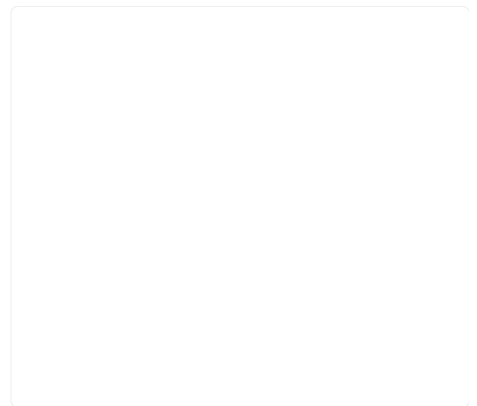
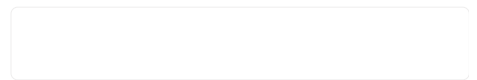


By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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It's an unfortunate irony that the things we do to keep ourselves clean can pollute the planet and even harm our own health. It's also discouraging that something as simple as a shower requires you to research multiple categories of cleaning product from shampoo to body wash. But let's start at the top; you can adopt a [green hair care routine](#) without



[Westlake Home - Luxury Organic Bedding](#)

giving up your hygiene or your health.

## No-poo

But you might give up your hair. You could shave your head and simply use [regular soap](#) on your scalp. Most of us aren't ready to make such a bold style statement in service to the environment. But unlike most other hygiene products, simply going without shampoo is an option.

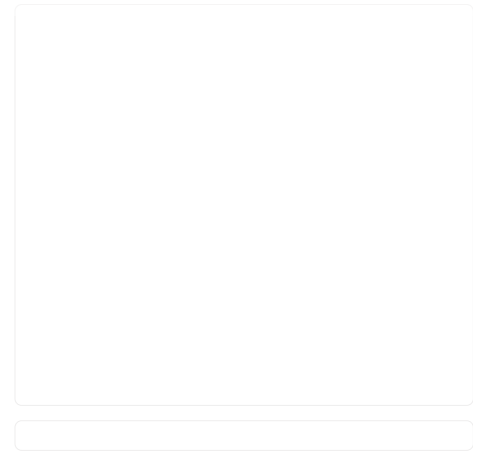
The [no-poo](#) (or unpoo) movement encourages people to ditch the shampoo and simply rinse their hair with water. When that's not enough, no-pooers may use a [DIY method](#) involving baking soda and apple cider vinegar. These materials are certainly environmentally friendly and are effective for cleaning. However, depending on your hair type, they may not be very good for your hair. While some people have used this method [successfully for years](#), after a few months, my hair began to resemble the hay under a scarecrow's hat. It took deep conditioning treatments to avoid the first method suggested – shaving it all off.

## Detergent-Free Shampoos

Most shampoos are basically liquid cleansers made from synthetic detergents. Additional chemicals are added for the aesthetics of the product, to create a pleasing color, scent, and texture. Although raw materials only account for about 9% of the product's environmental footprint, many people avoid synthetic, petroleum-based products on principle.

In particular, many of us want to avoid the detergent SLS (sodium lauryl sulfate or sometimes sodium laureth sulfate) that makes shampoos foamy. Rumors that SLS is a carcinogen seem to be unfounded; however, there may be other health issues. [Sulfates](#) like SLS are known skin irritants. They can also remove oils too effectively, leading to dry hair. There are some biodegradable products, like [Hairstory New Wash](#) that use essential oils and fatty alcohols instead of detergents.

There is another reason to look for biodegradable shampoo. According to a European [life cycle analysis](#) of more than 10,000 personal products (referenced throughout this article), disposal accounts for 20% of the environmental footprint of shampoo. That's because shampoo is not consumed when you use it; all that product rinses off of your hair and ends up



in wastewater. Wastewater treatment uses a lot of energy and chemicals, and does not necessarily remove all of the ingredients in shampoo before the water is released into the environment.

## Other Chemical Concerns

Surprisingly, shampoo and other common personal care products are significant sources of volatile organic compounds [contributing to air pollution](#). Many shampoos also contain [parabens](#) and phthalates. Because the most problematic ingredients are usually found in the perfumes used to scent shampoo, unscented shampoos like [Free & Clear](#) or [No Nothing Very Sensitive](#) are less likely to contain many of the most harmful chemicals. You can also find more natural, [safer shampoos](#) using the [Environmental Working Group Verified](#) list. The list includes inexpensive, familiar brands like [Herbal Essences](#) as well as less common options like Korean beauty brand [Whamisa](#).

## Packaging

Plastic bottles dominate among shampoo packaging options. Those bottles account for 22% of shampoos' environmental impact. Depending on where you live, the plastic from shampoo bottles [might be recyclable](#), but in many places it is not. There are some shampoo brands that use recycled plastic – even [recycled beach plastic](#) – to manufacture their bottles. The polyethylene pouches used by [Hairstory](#) require much less plastic than bottles and are recyclable where facilities exist.

But there are also plastic-free packaging options. Brands like [Alpine Provisions](#) and [Plaine Products](#) sell shampoo in aluminum bottles. [Lush](#) estimates that their solid shampoo bars [prevented 100 metric tons](#) of plastic waste in a year. EWG Verified [Soap for Goodness Sake](#) makes a combined shampoo and body bar that comes wrapped in [FSC](#) paper.

In fact, most solid shampoo bars are advertised for use on both hair and skin. Many environmentalists follow a rule of thumb that using fewer products creates fewer environmental impacts. There is no specific data in this case

to support the principle. But if you find a single cleanser that works for both your hair and body, you will have simplified your life a little.

## Clean Technique

No matter what you choose to clean your hair (or shaved scalp), keep in mind that use accounts for 28% of shampoos' environmental impact. Most of that impact comes from the water you use for washing and the energy needed to heat that water. Use a [low-flow showerhead](#) and an [efficient water heater](#). You might also use [homemade dry shampoo](#) to stretch the time between washes.

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By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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