

African American women often chemically straighten their hair to make it easier to maintain. Although that's not a problem, just make sure it doesn't get damaged from overprocessing. Keeping it conditioned also helps.

Drastically cutting your hair is also generally not a good idea. Although short hair has its moments in the fashion spotlight, agencies generally prefer models with mid-length or long hair, which is more versatile than short hair. A drastic haircut could also throw off the balance of your face and body. And remember, it's a lot easier to cut your hair later than have to sit around and wait for it to grow back.

The Photos You'll Need

One big mistake that many aspiring models make is spending tons of money on photos, portfolios, and composites before they get an agent. This is a total waste of money and time, and people who tell you otherwise either don't know what they're talking about or are scamming you.

Once you have an agent, she will make arrangements for all the photos, test shoots, portfolios, and composites you'll need. Most reputable agencies will even pay for them up front, and the cost will be subtracted from the money you earn once you start working. All photos taken without an agent's guidance are essentially useless because the photos may not capture the image the agent plans to build for you and promote to the fashion industry. When agents are looking for new models, they want to develop the model's own natural beauty into a marketable style, so spending a lot of money on professional photos that probably won't project the image they're after is not necessary. (Be wary if an agent asks you for money up front to pay for any of these photos, portfolios, or composites because it's not the usual practice.)

Once you have an agency, they will provide you with a portfolio and composites. The portfolio will have the agency's name and logo on it. The agent will also want to put together a composite card of you. The composite usually consists of a beautiful head shot and a body shot, and maybe a couple of additional photos showing your personality or exceptional attributes, such as beautiful legs or a lovely smile. The photos used in the composite are generally selected from test photo shoots that the agent has set up. Or the agency may want to incorporate pictures from magazine tear sheets (pictures of you that are cut out of the publication in which they appeared). The composite will also usually have the agency's logo on it. (For more information on test shoots for your book, see Chapter 13, "Testing, Testing, 1, 2, 3: Test Shoots"; to learn more about composites, portfolios, and other model materials, see Chapter 14, "Tools of the Modeling Trade.")

Photographers often prey on young, unsuspecting models and their parents, suggesting that models need loads of professional pictures, composites, portfolios, and elaborate, expensive photo sessions before they've found an agent or started their careers. They'll tell the models that agents won't accept them if they don't have a portfolio full of pictures. In these cases, the photographer is probably trying to scare the unsuspecting model in order to make money off the photo session, the development and processing of the film, and the printing of contact sheets and photos. If anyone tells you that you