

## *What About Wigs?*

### *An Introduction to Types of Wigs*

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There are a variety of reasons people seek out wigs – to change their appearance, to better capture the physical characteristics of a character for stage, screen or recreation, to cope with hair loss or to simply have fun. The reasons for wearing a wig often dictate the type of wig someone chooses to procure.

There are several types of wigs – there are fashion wigs which are the most common types of wigs – these wigs are usually pre-styled into a fairly permanent look. Fashion wigs are machine made and have a “stretch cap” which means **that** the back of the wig is mostly elasticized to allow the wig to fit a variety of head sizes. Most of the wigs available for Halloween and costumes also fall into this category. Fashion wigs run the gamut from very cheap to very expensive, and come in almost every style and color imaginable. They are the easiest to buy and the easiest to wear – you just pop them right onto your head!

The drawback to machine-made fashion and costume wigs is that they often look very un-natural, particularly the most economical varieties. This is due to several factors – machine made wigs tend to be very **thick; they** require a lot of hair to hide **both** the understructure of the wig and the wearer’s own **hair**. They also have fairly abrupt and heavy hairlines – these are most often hidden with bangs. That means that any style that requires the wig hair to be worn pulled back from the face or in an updo is going to look fairly unnatural and “wiggly”. However, for a simple desire to quickly change hairstyles for a day or **complete** a costume, these wigs are a reasonable choice.

For consumers needing a more natural looking wig, they have the option of buying a hand-tied or ventilated wig. Despite the name, many of these “hand-tied” wigs are actually made by machines - the term “hand-tied” refers mostly to the fact that rather than an elasticized wig cap covered in strips of wefting, they are constructed from single knots of hair tied into a denser mesh foundation. This process of tying strands of hair into the wig leads to a more even spread of hair across the head, and **looks more natural**.

The machine made, ventilated wigs are more expensive than the wefted stretch-cap wigs. They also tend to come in fewer styles and are less common. These are usually better suited to those looking for a natural street wig, particularly in cases of hair loss. They typically suffer from the same unnatural hairline issues of fashion wigs and usually require bangs in the front to help hide the hairline.

The next step up the wig food chain is a custom wig. These pieces are constructed specifically for an individual, and are the most natural looking options. These are mostly used in film, theatre and tv, or by individuals seeking very natural or specific wigs, such as re-enactors, impersonators, or characters like Santa. As one might expect, these are the most expensive option for wig wear – but if made well, a custom wig can last a lifetime.

Not only do custom pieces look very specific, they are the most natural option for most people. In addition to being hand-knotted or ventilated and fit to the head of the wearer, these pieces also have what is called a “ventilated front”. This means that rather than the abrupt hairline featured on most wigs, these wigs have a piece of fine mesh that has tiny hairs knotted into it – these hairs follow the hairline of the wearer and give the illusion that the wig is actually growing from the scalp of the wearer. A ventilated front makes styles pushed back from the face look very natural.

There are two types of hair available for wigs – human or synthetic. Fashion wigs and costume wigs are most typically made from synthetic hair, usually a plastic polymer of some type. This allows them to be heat set into a **permanent** style, even after many washings and wearings. Synthetic hair is usually much cheaper than human hair, and is **available** in a wide range of colors and textures.

Though synthetic hair wigs are **considered** lower maintenance **due** to their permanent style, they are also less durable. They are **susceptible** to frizz and broken hairs, and unlike human hair, there is not much to be done with a badly frizzed or damaged synthetic wig. They are especially vulnerable to heat, and will melt upon contact with a hot curling iron or other heat styling tool. Synthetic wigs are best for shorter styles that have less hair hanging down to become snarled and damaged or for short term uses, such as costume parties. They can be rolled onto plastic curlers and lightly steamed into curls or waves, if a style modification is desired. Synthetic wigs can be dyed using a liquid dye such as RIT, but the saturation of color can vary and care must be taken that the wig not be submerged into boiling water or left lying against a very hot pan. They can also have highlights, lowlights or colored streaks added with a permanent marker.

By contrast, human hair wigs can be heat set with a curling iron, rolled onto curlers or crimped with a crimper – they can be restyled an infinite number of times. The downside to human hair, other than cost, is that it is vulnerable to the same maladies that affect all human hair – humidity will cause it to fall, droop or become frizzy. For this reason, it is not the best choice in situations where the wig will encounter a great deal of sweat or moisture.

Typically, a hand-knotted or ventilated wig, particularly a custom piece, will be made of human hair, as it is a higher quality material, looks more natural than synthetics, has greater versatility and is easier for the wig maker to work with. When making a wig with a ventilated front, human hair should be used as some people choose to lightly glue the mesh of a ventilated front to their skin and the solvents needed to remove the spirit gum will destroy synthetic hair.

Within the above categories, there are a variety of exceptions and compromises. Some wig stylists and makers swear by **synthetic** hair for its ability to be permanently fused into a single style. Others feel that human hair is the only way to achieve a wig style that is very soft and natural. Both have their places in the world of wigs.

Now, the reader may be left wondering if their only option for a “good” wig is to shell out hundreds of dollars for a custom made, hand knotted wig. Rest assured that although a high quality custom piece is the Cadillac of the wig world, there are many options for achieving a natural look or quality wig on a Pinto budget.

One of these options is purchasing a moderately priced human hair wig, and having a wig maker attach a ventilated front to it. This allows the wig wearer the best of both worlds – they have a very natural, comfortable hand tied front but the ease and versatility of a stretch-back wig cap. This is most suitable for street-wear, stage use, or any style that requires a swept-back for head and longer, fuller back style – for example, many styles from the 1940's. This is less **ideal** for a style that requires a complicated up-do as the wefting in the back of the wig will be difficult to hide once the wig is gathered up.

A ventilated front can be attached to a synthetic wig or a fashion wig – however, the investment of having a front made can be undermined by the potential damage that synthetic hair is susceptible to, leaving one with a beautiful front and a frizzy, damaged back.

Whatever your wig needs, there is almost certainly an option for you. Many larger cities have one or two wig shops where a variety of fashion wigs can be tried on and purchased and there is a plethora of wig retailers on the internet. For special pieces, a quick internet search will turn up wig masters like myself who take on custom projects. The possibilities are endless!