

Good, bad, ugly of skin care: Labels trump marketing hype

As a vegetarian, I'm accustomed to reading labels.

For more than 20 years I've read the labels on prepared foods to make sure there are no offensive animal products lurking in there.

I'm not a vegan; vegetarianism for me is more of a health choice than an animal rights statement.

Animal products I find offensive are those that required the demise of said animal, for example, beef tallow or gelatin. Animal products that the beast supplies while alive — eggs, milk, honey and the like — are kosher by me (although not necessarily certified Kosher — that's a story for another time).

As the years have gone by, however, I've looked beyond potential animal product content, all in the name of better health. First it was sodium, then partially hydrogenated fats, and now I'm on the lookout for high fructose corn syrup.

Who knows what risky ingredients will be identified next?

But when it comes to skin-care products I'm pretty new to the label-reading game. That's probably because I've been blessed with genes that seem to be doing a pretty good job of preserving my youthful complexion.

I can't help but worry about the future, however, so I've tried plenty of products. None have been fabulous, some have been pretty nice, others have lasted through a few dabs or splashes only to be abandoned for being too greasy, foul smelling or stinging my eyes.

I've dabbled in the grocery store variety of products (Olay, Neutrogena), beauty counter items (Clinique, Estee Lauder) and beauty boutique brands (Lush, Lorac). For a while I was hooked on wholesome-sounding, pleasant-smelling brands like Origins and Aveda.

Then I decided to go the natural products route, experimenting with the likes of Burt's Bees, Kiss My Face, Beauty Without Cruelty and Zia.

All of these choices were driven by marketing, not ingredients. If I liked the branding (promises of firming, revitalizing, uplifting, plumping or some other illusion of youth) and it smelled OK, I'd give it a try. Reading the tiny type on the label required fumbling with reading glasses (an unmistakable symbol of age), so I figured if it claimed to be good for you it probably was.

But in October I had a bit of a conversion experience at Naturally Boulder Day when Pamela Lambert gave her pitch for Novaurora, the Boulder-based line of organic skin-care products she developed.

The skin is the body's largest organ, and it breathes just like the lungs, letting toxins and chemicals escape the body, Lambert says. Lotions that prevent the skin from breathing — including not only petroleum products but natural products like beeswax and some vegetable oils — may make the skin feel soft at first but eventually weigh it down and cause sagging.

Then there are the chemical additives — parabens, sodium laurel sulfate, propylene glycol, carbomer, carbopol, triethanolamine,

phthalates and others — many of which find their way into even so-called natural skin-care products. Some are suspected or known carcinogens, some may cause negative reactions if you have environmental sensitivities or allergies, some we don't know whether or not they have long-term negative effects.

The key to buying skin-care products is to read the label, whether they are Novaurora or any other brand, Lambert says. "It's very important to what ingredients one is sensitive to. Some people are allergic to aloe vera," one of the main ingredients in Novaurora products.



EQUAL TIME

Caron Schwartz Ellis

Since her background is financial services, not chemistry, Lambert hired Ben Fuchs, president of Sanitas Skincare, another Boulder-based skin-care company, to develop her line.

Fuchs, a pharmacist by training, took on Lambert because, he says, "We share a spiritual vision."

Sanitas' nearly 40 products are very different from Novaurora's seven. Fuchs' focus is on skin nutrition, even for as simple a problem as dry skin.

"The worst thing for dry skin is to put on a moisturizing cream," he says. "The appropriate way to treat skin is to feed your skin. Feed yourself the raw materials so it can make its own moisture factors."

Fuchs looks at skin care as health care that treats the skin as an organ, he says. "As a side benefit you get beauty."

A big part of Fuchs' mission is to educate people about feeding their skin with his products. It's more than reading labels — it's understanding that Sanitas products are "tools and treatments," he says. "This product line is designed for a savvy and sophisticated audience. Most skin-care products don't satisfy educated women."

But like Lambert, Erik Kreider, president of Kabana Skin Care, also of Boulder, believes that if consumers just read labels they can learn enough to know what to buy. "Hopefully you can understand the ingredients, because if you can't you have no idea what you are putting on your body."

Kreider prides himself on using 10 "readily accessible and understandable" ingredients — water, lanolin, mango butter, shea butter, cocoa butter, zinc oxide, essential oils, jojoba oil, soy lecithin and vitamin E — in Kabana products.

Now that I've seen the light, skin-care marketing sounds more like mumbo jumbo and less like the secret of eternal youth. Look for me on the skin-care aisle at one of our local natural products emporiums, reading glasses (alas) firmly planted on my nose.

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