

Breaking down cosmetic labels

Experts warn buyer to beware when purchasing 'natural' beauty products; investigate the ingredients

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Shiitake mushrooms, soy, rosemary, chamomile, mint and green tea -- take a guess about what these ingredients are used to make.

If you said a sauce or an appetizer, you probably spend more time perusing cookbooks than shopping for beauty products. All these ingredients are heavily promoted by cosmetics manufacturers as ideal nourishment for your skin.

But is that true? Or is the hype surrounding plant-based or natural cosmetics products based more on marketing than science?

Self-described "cosmetics cop" Paula Begoun, author of several books about the cosmetics industry including *Don't Go to the Cosmetics Counter Without Me*, says consumers have to be part detective themselves to know what's behind the label on most so-called "natural" beauty products.

"The term 'natural' is meaningless -- there is no standard or cosmetic regulation for this term," she says. "Anyone can put this on their label regardless of content."

And even if a product does contain plant-based ingredients, Begoun says that's not necessarily a good thing.

"There are lots of natural ingredients that can be problematic or irritating for skin, increase the risk of sun damage and cause cell death (grain alcohol is the best example of the latter)." She also identifies plant-based ingredients like lemon, grapefruit, mint, peppermint, menthol, camphor, eucalyptus and ivy as potentially irritating.

As well, she says, many products are so highly processed that any of the beneficial qualities of the plant touted on the label may well be negligible. "What it takes to get an ingredient out of the ground and into a cosmetic renders the term 'natural' more marketing than anything else."

Perhaps surprisingly, Diane Bernard of SeaFlora, a seaweed-based line of skin-care products made on Vancouver Island, agrees with Begoun. She says it can be hard for consumers to wade through the hype and find products that have a beneficial level of natural ingredients that haven't been destroyed by processing.

"You need to differentiate between what's being marketed and what's actually in the product," says Bernard, whose line is sold only through spas.

Some plant-based products "go through a fairly brutal extraction process, including bleaching, that strips them of most of their vitamins and minerals," she says. And some use preservatives like paraben and formaldehyde, which have been linked to cancer and other health issues.

SeaFlora uses natural preservatives that are free of formaldehyde and paraben, Bernard says, and produces its products in small batches using a gentle extraction process. That means they have a shelf life of 18 months to two years, as opposed to five to seven years for most commercial products.

Aveda, owned by cosmetics giant Estee Lauder, is well known for using plant-based ingredients in its products, including its Botanical Kinetics line.

Ramona Caporicci, Aveda's executive marketing director for Canada, says the company believes plant-based ingredients are absorbed into the skin better than synthetic ones.

She adds that Aveda tries to limit its use of synthetic preservatives, but that's not always viable. "Whenever possible, we try to use a plant-based preservative system."

But she says some products -- such as sunscreens containing SPF, for example -- have to contain synthetic-based preservatives to meet government standards.

So what should a cautious cosmetics customer do to make sure they're getting a product that will actually be good for them? If you do opt to buy "natural" or plant-based products, Bernard suggests reading not just the front of the label, but the back as well. "One of the things you need to do is to take a look at the ingredient list," she says.

If the natural ingredient touted in the name of the product is at or near the top of the list, you may be on to something.

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