

Is Organic Skincare All It's Touted To Be?

The term "organic" or "natural" has become bewildering as most skincare companies, whether new or old, now make similar claims. So how does one know if a skincare product is truly 'organic or natural?'

BY EVELYN QUEK



Some believe that if the skincare is edible, then it's organic. That seemed to be the theme of the last organic salon which I attended, for I saw tempting face masks made of real chocolate, strawberry and green tea, all good enough to eat! While this may appeal to diehard organic purists and spur others to look for homemade skincare recipes, the fact is, many are now more cautious of what they put on their skin every day.

Given that the average woman applies more than 200 chemicals to her skin in one day and that 60 percent of these skincare products containing chemicals are absorbed into the blood stream, it is hardly surprising that organic and natural skincare business is set to grow by 20 percent each year.

What is "organic"?

For a start, the term should refer to anything grown without using harmful, synthetic chemicals like pesticides, insecticides, herbicides, fungicides or fertilizers. In countries like Australia where the standards of "certified organic" is very stringent, it goes as far as ensuring a neighbour's farm follows the same methods of growth, to ensure no leaching of chemicals from inorganic farms over to organic fields. But such strict standards are rare, so knowing where a skincare product is from, is the first guarantee of organically grown or natural ingredients.

"Organic" or "natural" also refers to the non use of chemicals or preservatives in shampoos, conditioners, body washes, cleansers, toners, moisturisers or lo-

tions. Therefore such products should never contain toxic chemicals such as SLE, SLS, propylene glycol, mineral oil, parabens (butyl-, ethyl-, methyl- and propyl) to name only a few. The only way to ensure this, is to read the labels. Never mind the glossy packaging or the PR hype surrounding the launch of a "miracle product", or whether it is endorsed by an international media star or porcelain-skin women – anything containing a mix of organic ingredients and the usual chemicals are definitely non organic.

"Organic" also means products produced and tested without any harm to animals or the environment. By this alone, many brands do not make the grade. Even highly expensive skincare brands tend to contain animal glycerine

THE TRUE MEANING OF ORGANIC OR NATURAL

- Truly certified organic skincare must contain at least 95 percent % of organic ingredients with a small allowance for non organic but natural ingredients. Country of manufacture with strict, "certified organic" standards are better.
- Ingredients should be read top down as typically, the top 3 usually make up 90-95% of the product.
- Many essential ingredients for all organic skincare such as emollients, emulsifiers, preservatives, humectants and surfactants, can be both natural or synthetic. Natural is safe and synthetic is not.
- Organic products more prone to spoilage, must be stored below 30 degrees. Shelf life ranges from 18-24 months. Once opened, use within 3-6 months. **SL**

A QUICK GUIDE TO SOME HARMFUL CHEMICALS IN MOST SKINCARE

Propylene Glycol

Penetration enhancer, can cause dermatitis, liver & kidney damage or inhibit cell growth.

SLE, SLS, ALS (Sodium/Ammonium Laureth Sulphate)

Detergent/Foaming agent. Can cause cancer, eye damage, hair loss, skin allergies.

Benzoic Acid

Preservative, cancer causing, disrupts hormonal system, causes skin allergies.

Parabens (methyl, propyl, butyl & ethyl)

Can disrupt hormones, interfere with growth, reproduction & cause allergies.

PEGs

Moisturiser, interacts with other compounds to become carcinogenic.

Dioxane

1,4 Dioxane banned in California as cancer causing.

DEA (Foaming Agent)

Can become carcinogenic.

Alcohol (Isopropyl, ethanol, ethyl, methanol, benzyl, & SD)

Solvent, Drying, strips skin's natural protection making it more vulnerable to bacteria attack

(Ref: Pat Thomas 'Skin Deep')

NB: FDA in USA, regulates the manufacture of drugs & food but has always been lax in skincare, thereby allowing some very harmful chemicals to be used in mass marketed products.

and toxic ingredients. The packaging also matters. Skincare packaged in biodegradable plastics, recycled paper or cloth bags, obviously come from manufacturers who are ecologically minded.

In essence, organic or natural skincare is the sole use of the healing and revitalising properties of herbs, fruits, flowers and other natural materials such as clays for skin treatments. Like the ancient, beauty herbal treatments of *jamu* or ayurveda, all abide by a belief of working closely with Mother Nature's gifts to rejuvenate and revitalise the skin, with as light a footprint as possible.

Benefits of organic or natural skincare – is it for real?

Apart from the feel-good factor, plant based remedies allow skin to breathe better, and are much safer, healthwise. Research by consumer groups like the EWG (Environmental Working Group) has shown that millions of people are exposed daily to chemical toxins in skincare products. For example there is a clear link between the increased use of parabens (found in most skin

care products) and greater risk of breast cancer.

While the skin is our best protection, its high absorbency also allows all the "bad stuff" through causing them to accumulate in the body bringing harm to our hormonal systems and organs. Therefore reducing the chances of absorbing chemical toxins can only be a good thing. This will also prevent and control skin allergies like eczema – which are afflicting more and more people, both old and young.

So where is the hype?

Many so-called organic and natural skincare "miracle" anti-aging products are often just mixes of one or two organic ingredients with the usual cocktail of chemicals that use new nano technologies to "guarantee instant results". But artificially plumped up skin cells sag when the effect wears off while the chemicals stay on in the body.

On the other end of the scale, organic skincare of unknown origins and not subjected to proper testing is just as du-

bious. Recently, I picked up a jar of purportedly 100 percent turnip skin whitener, made in a neighbouring country. I looked at its contents and the dirty nails of the chap selling it and shuddered.

For this reason, dermatologists tend to consider organic skincare as more hype than real. For the medically trained, there is a greater comfort from the use of the known and tested even if it means ultimately prescribing harmful steroids for skin allergies. Likewise when established European or other skincare brands have a pharmaceutical origin, it is not surprising that such skincare are never 100 percent natural or organic.

After all, moving in tune with Mother Nature is a commitment not all can make. **SL**



Management consultant, speaker and writer Evelyn Quek has made her own journey on skincare, succeeding to rid herself of bad pigmentation through regular, no nonsense care. Owner of a natural skincare business today, she wishes to share her experience with women out there.