

Natural Selection

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Organic skincare products are rising in popularity, despite the challenges the sector faces.

"Don't panic, it's organic" may well be the catch-cry of the next generation. With more and more studies linking the rise in asthma, skin sensitivities and cancer to an increase in chemical exposure, the global community is not only questioning what is going into their food, but what is in their skincare products. According to Euromonitor, organic skincare is one of the fastest growing sectors in cosmetics worldwide.

Narelle Chenery, creator of organic skincare brand, Miessence, says, "Too many studies have been done to ignore that what goes on our skin can either be pure and enhance the skin, or toxic and detrimental to our health. The fact that hundreds of toxic, synthetic ingredients are being used in cosmetics is unacceptable, especially when there are perfectly suitable natural, organic alternatives."

The new generation of organic skincare abandons the rustic, hippie image of yesteryear and embraces sophistication, competing with the mainstream brands in terms of marketing and packaging. Stephen Damiani, creator of Eyre BioBotanics, an organic skincare range for men, says, "I sensed among the gen-Xers that good grooming was now a necessity and these were the principles that I built the range on."

"Organic skincare is not only saving your body from chemical overload, but also the environment," says Catriona Macmillan from OTACNet, the Organic Traders' and Consumers' Network. "It's beauty with a conscience, as certified organic ingredients must be sustainably grown, cultivated and processed. This means no artificial fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides and no genetic modification, and the ingredients must come from renewable sources, so no petrochemicals."

She says that as a result, the ingredients are often more active as they come from richer, uncompromised soil. "And those raw ingredients that are biodynamic are picked at a time when they are most potent."

She adds, "With pressing environmental issues and food shortages around the world, sustainable farming is the way of the future. Buying organic or biodynamic ingredients or products is empowering for the consumer; it gives them a chance to make a difference."

The biggest issue the organic skincare industry faces is authenticity. Unlike organic foods, there are no national or international regulations for organic cosmetics.

"If 'natural' was the most abused and overused word of the 90s, sadly, 'organic' runs the same risk in this decade," says Macmillan. "Marketing can be very persuasive, so beware - the organic shampoo or moisturiser you've been using may only contain one to two per cent organic ingredients, if that. Labelling laws are not tightly regulated, so the consumer can still be easily misled."

Chenery went to the food certifying body, Australia Certified Organic (ACO), to have her skincare products certified organic. To become "food certified", a cosmetic product must go through a rigorous process, she says.

"The product must be free of synthetic chemicals, and at least 95 per cent of the ingredients, apart from water, must be certified organic. Basically it has to be good enough to eat."

Creating a certified organic product isn't easy, explains Sharon McGlinchey of MV Luxury Organic Skincare. "From a cost viewpoint, producing some high-concentration organic formulations is up to 10 times more costly than producing chemical-based skincare."

Then there is the challenge of creating a stable cream without using synthetic emulsifiers or preservatives. "I have put as much organic content in my creams as possible without compromising on their performance. My oil-based products are 99 per cent organic, but my creams are 87 per cent," she says. "I want a stable cream that doesn't separate and won't grow bacteria. At the end of the day it has to be of high efficacy and commercially viable."

Damiani had to think laterally about preserving his creams and ended up winning an award for his innovations in packaging. "Our airless delivery systems prevent the return of air or product back into the bottle during operation. This unique feature allows for the lowest possible levels of naturally derived preservatives in our products."

Macmillan says, "We need to take all of the challenges these brands face on board, assess them and come up with a national standard for body care." In the meantime, customers should look for products that are "certified organic" or those that list a high percentage of organic content. Chenery says, "Also check that those who aren't certified don't contain any nasties." For a list of harmful chemicals in skincare products, look up the Environmental Working Group (EWG) website at www.ewg.org

Macmillan adds, "As authentic organic products gain popularity, manufacturers are gaining a better understanding of how more sensitive and temperamental natural ingredients need to be handled, which means that organic skincare products are becoming more sophisticated. And, as consumers also grow more sophisticated, there is growing confidence in the market for organic products, both in Australia and overseas."

CHEMICALS IN SKINCARE

McGlinchey says the challenges of making an organic product are definitely worth it. "I've managed to successfully treat hundreds of clients with skin sensitivities, many caused by toxic overload. When you read up on what is put into mass market products, it is mind-boggling."

Studies show that, on average, women use nine mass-market personal care products each day, containing a total of 126 unique chemicals. Toxicologist Dr Peter Dingle says, "Although companies assure us that the chemicals known to be toxic are in amounts too small to cause harm, no one knows what their long-term, cumulative effects will be. What's more, we don't know how toxic these substances are when combined with other ingredients in the product."

A study conducted by the University of California revealed that more than 58,000 hairdressers, manicurists and cosmetologists developed cancer believed to be due to their work environment at four times the rate of the general population.

Chenery says, "Parabens are widely used preservatives in deodorants, and they are found in 90 per cent of breast tumours. One study on a woman's breast milk found 300 new chemicals that weren't around 50 years ago. To discover how permeable your skin is, rub your feet with cut garlic; you'll breathe it out of your mouth 20 minutes later."

The chemicals found in many mass market cosmetics are permissible because the cosmetics industry is self-regulated. The government does not require human health studies for cosmetic

and other personal care products before they are sold. The EWG says that 94 per cent of skincare ingredients in cosmetics haven't been tested for human safety.

One of the skin's main jobs is to help protect us from outside threats, but it is not waterproof. Depending on the size of the molecules in a formulation, and the environment in which it is applied (heat and water both facilitate absorption, so products used in the shower have a higher absorbency rate) topical applications can be absorbed at impressive levels.

"On average, our skin absorbs between one to 10 per cent of body care products," says Chenery. This is not including some of the new penetration enhancers in skincare products. Penetration enhancers help ingredients pass through to the deeper layers of the skin and the bloodstream. The EWG says that 55 per cent of all products on the market contain penetration enhancers that can increase absorbency into the bloodstream. Fifty per cent of these products contain known or suspected carcinogens.

THE ETHICAL BRANDS

* Eyre BioBotanics Skincare www.eyrebiobotanics.com Skincare for men. Contains both organic and wild-harvested (meaning picked from the wild) ingredients. Certified by Ecocert, www.ecocert.com

* Dr Hauschka www.drhauschka.com.au Skincare certified by the BDIH (a German association that has developed guidelines for certified natural cosmetics).

* Miessence www.mionegroup.com Certified organic by the ACO.

* MV Luxury Organic Skincare www.mvskincare.com.au Organic content is stated as a percentage of 87 per cent plus. The products are free of nasty chemicals.

* Nancy Evans Certified Organic Skincare www.rosehipskincare.com The range is certified by the Organic Food Chain, www.organicfoodchain.com.au

* Sydney Essential Oil Company www.seoc.com.au Body massage oils certified by the Biological Farmers Australia (BFA), www.bfa.com.au

* The Organic Pharmacy www.rescu.com.au Certified by the Soil Association in the UK, www.soilassociation.org

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