

To question is only natural

The organic beauty industry is booming but how wholesome is it, asks Debbie Elkind.

Stroll the skin care aisle of a pharmacy and you'll discover a world of products that appear to have been created by Mother Earth herself: "100 per cent pure", "real fruit waters", "natural vitamins", "herbal extracts", and "essential oils".

Brands such as Aveda and The Body Shop hooked us on the idea of plant-based eco-friendly products years ago, but recent incarnations have shaken off the last vestiges of the hairy-legged, Birkenstock-wearing image and taken a sexy stiletto strut into the mainstream.

And it's big, big business: brands that have positioned themselves as holistic alternatives have morphed into global multinationals over the past two decades.

A report in August last year by the market research company Packaged Facts, said US sales of natural and organic skin care, haircare and cosmetics reached \$US3.9 billion (\$5.2 billion) in 2003, with skin care being the fastest-growing segment. The market is expected to rocket to nearly \$US6 billion by 2005.

Local figures are harder to quantify, but given that the Australian retail market for organic food is expected to reach \$400 million in 2005, it's safe to say we are also increasingly drawn to choices perceived to be eco-friendly. South Australia-based Jurlique International, for example, claims that sales of its herbal skin care, cosmetics and aromatherapy products gross about \$80 million annually worldwide - a 10-fold increase since 1996.

The Packaged Facts report credits a number of factors for the surge in natural and organic beauty products. These include growing consumer interest in holistic approaches to wellness,

increased "self-doctoring", the growth of billion-dollar natural food chains and greater availability of organic ingredients. Perhaps most tellingly, it points to the "prestige factor" that is increasingly associated with "natural" products.

Major holistic brands, such as Jurlique, Dr. Hauschka and Aesop, take their natural approach seriously and apply strict standards to product production.

But the success of these boutique brands is driving less scrupulous advertisers to inflate their "natural" and "organic" claims. And, for now at least, there's little to be done to stop them. "Consumers have to realise that phrases like 'all natural' are purely marketing ploys and they very rarely mean anything," says Nicola Ballenden, a health policy officer for the Australian Consumers' Association (ACA).

Ballenden says there is virtually no domestic regulation governing the use of the terms "natural" or "organic" when it comes to beauty products, and that even the Truth in Labelling laws offer consumers little protection. "It's a tricky area, because it crosses over into health and is increasingly being mixed with therapeutic claims."

However, there is a new advertising code in the works for all therapeutic products, including cosmetics and skin care, which Ballenden says may help rein in some false promises.

Under the Trans-Tasman Therapeutic Products Advertising Code, to come into effect on July 2005, advertisers will be required to comply with the code's guidelines prohibiting the use of unproven therapeutic claims in advertising.

The ACA expects cosmetics and skin care companies to argue that their natural claims are therapeutic. It's an argument that could easily descend into semantic wrangling. For example, a company could claim that the "natural vitamins and minerals" in its product "may reduce the appearance of fine lines", but not that it "will delay the signs of ageing". Ballenden and others in the industry suggest that regulations need to be tightened even further.

"We are pushing for the terms 'natural' and 'organic' to be regulated in food standards, so it makes sense for it to be regulated in the beauty industry too, because consumers have a lot of expectations when it comes to organic claims," says Ballenden.

"I think people would find it scary if they knew just how poorly regulated it really is right now," says Andrew Monk, CEO of the Biological Farmers Association (BFA).

"A lot of companies claim to use 'natural' this, and 'natural' that, and they may, indeed, use natural ingredients, but then they dump a whole lot of chemicals in with them."

Monk is also alarmed at the misleading claims made by some mainstream brands. "You see a lot of products that claim to have aloe vera, but what they've really done is add a minuscule amount to the water content that makes up the bulk of the product and called it 70 per cent organic. A product needs to have at least 10 per cent aloe vera to have any benefit at all.

"We're at pains to express concern about the things people put on their skin. I think people are used to thinking of their body as an impenetrable barrier, but the chemicals you put on your skin are ultimately digested by the body."

Whether or not the chemicals used in skin care products are harmful is a matter of huge debate. As is the question of whether even the most genuinely natural ingredients can provide real cosmetic benefits.

However, if your preference is to reduce your use of chemicals, you could clearly do worse than to look for certified organic products. Monk likes to point people towards a Queensland range called Miessence, which, he believes, is the world's first and only fully certified range of organic skin care products.

"While we appreciate that some of the big holistic brands are sourcing and growing organic products at the agricultural end, they haven't gone completely down the organic track as far as the end product," Monk says.

"Because Miessence is certified organic, a minimum of 95 per cent of their product must come from organic sources and it all has to be manufactured organically."

Narelle Chenery, founding director of Organic and Natural Enterprise Group (ONE Group), creators of Miessence, says: "Ten years ago I was selling another product range when I came across a cosmetic dictionary that told me the ingredients in the products I was selling weren't as natural and healthy as I was being told.

"The cosmetics industry defines anything that derives from nature as 'natural', but I use a simple analogy: no one would have a problem giving their kids mashed potatoes, but they might have a problem giving them vodka. But vodka is derived from mashed potatoes.

"That derivation process can completely transform a raw ingredient into something completely different that is not necessarily healthy or good for you or something that you want to put onto your skin."