

What's in *your* makeup?

Organic cosmetics are all the rage, but don't be confused by all the choices.

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Photos by Matt Wittmeyer

You are what you eat. And what you smear on your face? Digestive systems help process the food we eat, but our skin absorbs and cannot “digest” all unhealthy ingredients found in makeup.

Most of the cosmetics found in drug and department stores are chemically based. Several brands of mascara are made with coal tar. Petroleum, the base used in gasoline and plastic, is also the base of an alarming number of cosmetics.

“If you just put on lipstick twice a day, during your lifetime you're going to ingest a small amount of plastic in your body that's not going anywhere — it can't be dissolved,” said Chi Wah Brown, co-owner (with husband Paul) of Chi Wah Aveda in Brighton.

Perhaps consumers are catching on about these chemically based cosmetics companies, because organic lines are becoming increasingly popular. According to Brown, Aveda (whose products are made with organic ingredients) has seen an increase in sales despite a fledgling economy. NVEY ECO, one of only a handful of companies that sells certified organic makeup, saw a 255 percent increase in sales from 2006 to 2007, according to Sarah Cherot, vice president of sales and marketing.

As interest in organic products grows, so does confusion over what the word actually means. Consumers are inundated with a shopping list of related terms: “certified organic,” “100 percent organic,” “made with organic ingredients” or “all-natural.”

As definitions can be dicey, reading labels is an easy way for consumers to understand what is in a cosmetic product. Plants or essential oils can usually be assumed safe for use. Unfamiliar ingredients can be researched on SkinDeep (www.cosmeticsdatabase.com), an online cosmetics safety guide. Visitors type in the name of an ingredient and find a “hazard score,” rating it on a scale of one to 10.

Cherot named talc, propylene glycol and sodium laureth



sulfate as the top three ingredients to avoid. Brown mentioned formaldehyde as a danger to consumers' health and offers her fingers — cracked and peeled — as evidence. The ingredient, also used in embalming, was present in the mannequin hair she used weekly to demonstrate styling and cutting techniques to her staff. Only her thumb, pointer finger and middle finger — the three fingers hairdressers use to handle hair as they cut — had been permanently affected.

One of the latest trends in organic makeup is "color that functions," according to Cherot. While many people think of only green and brown as organic colors, NVEY ECO has eyeshadows in turquoise, purple, white and more. The line's best-selling product is ECO Erase (\$30), a concealer to hide dark circles and other imperfections.

Brown has been seeing a softer, lighter trend in organic cosmetics. "I think it's about the very sheer and healthy look with

makeup," she said. Each person needs to accentuate their positive features while minimizing others, according to Brown. Chi Wah Aveda's most popular product is Inner Light Tinted Moisturizer (\$26), which provides a light, dewy complexion with SPF 15.

Customers interested in learning more about organic and traditional products can make an appointment with a licensed esthetician at Wegmans in Pittsford for a cosmetic consultation. Estheticians provide complimentary cosmetic application to help match customers with products and provide education on the growing trend of organic cosmetics.

"At this point in the U.S., there's not a lot of regulation going on with our cosmetic products, so it's really important for the consumer to educate themselves on what's safe and what can be harmful to the body," said Emily Mosher, a licensed esthetician at Wegmans. 

WHAT 'ORGANIC' MEANS

According to The USDA's National Organic Program, products labeled "100 percent organic" must contain only organically produced ingredients. "Organic" can refer to products containing 95 percent organic ingredients, while products labeled "made with organic ingredients" must include 70 percent. However, the USDA does not certify many cosmetic products. Most genuinely organic products are certified in foreign countries. NVEY ECO's products, for example, are certified organic by the Australian government and the Organic Food Chain, a private certifying company.



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