

# Organic

by Molly Brown



It sounds easy, achieving a natural look. But in our world, which gets more hectic—and polluted—every day, ensuring that what we put in—and on—our bodies is healthy may be more difficult than we think.

In fact, it's tough to determine what is considered natural in cosmetics—or what natural even means. Cosmetic products can range from ones that only use 100 percent organic produce to those that may splash in just one organic ingredient. Add in the fact that cosmetics don't abide by the same stringent government regulation that applies to food and drugs, and it's even tougher to know for sure what you're slathering on your skin.

## Know What's in There

Toothpaste, moisturizers, shampoos. These are products you use every day. But do you really know what's in there?

The Environmental Working Group (EWG) does. The Washington, D.C.-based environmental and health watchdog organi-

zation has cataloged thousands of ingredients into a cosmetics database called Skin Deep. The online resource at [ewg.org](http://ewg.org) carries reports on nearly 15,000 products, culled from 37 toxicity and regulatory databases worldwide, assigning products a score based on potentially toxic substances found in each. And there's plenty more work to be done. The Food and Drug Administration does not test cosmetics for safety before going to market. Skin Deep researcher Hema Subramanian says that nearly 89 percent of ingredients have never been fully assessed.

"We're working toward getting the government to make the FDA do safety testing or have companies release safety testing info to the public," Subramanian says.

While a federal law won't happen tomorrow, there is some progress. EWG has created a contract that at least 500 companies have signed that promises full disclosure on ingredients. And the government is beginning to intervene. In 2005, California passed the Safe Cosmetics Act, which requires companies to disclose to

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*With new innovations in makeup and hygiene products, beauty has never been so natural*



the state any ingredients that can cause cancer or birth defects.

But despite reports on toxins, linking cosmetics to serious diseases like cancer is tricky. "The incentive of the companies and the FDA is looking at immediate cause and effect," Subramanian says. "We need longer-term studies, more experiments, to find these links." Adding to the confusion is what Subramanian calls the "cocktail effect." Daily, the average American layers nine products—for women, it's 12—that carry around 126 ingredients. Those ingredients can mix into potentially harmful combos.

But the Cosmetic Ingredient Review (CIR), an organization that works with the FDA to test ingredients, contends that most cosmetics are safe. CIR director Alan Andersen, says the fact that there aren't widespread reports about adverse effects from cosmetic use demonstrates it's not a problem area.

"We prefer to look at the risk-assessment approach that says, 'Okay, is there a level at which this stuff isn't dangerous?' Then compare that level with what is actually in cosmetics," Andersen

says, adding that concentration levels found in cosmetics often register thousands of times below what's deemed toxic—to rodents.

And EWG and CIR agree that just because it says it's organic doesn't mean it's safe. "The naturals we see as a problem area," Andersen says. "A lot of plant extract companies say, 'Well it's natural.' Well, poison ivy is natural. The current public perception is that natural is better, and that's not always the case."

## It Led Off with Lead

For thousands of years, people have been using makeup to improve their looks. Powders and potions are nothing new. The Egyptians lined their eyes with kohl, the Romans powdered their faces and the French used red rouge to perk up their complexions.

It's what they used that's alarming.

The Romans and Egyptians dusted themselves with powders containing white lead, arsenic and mercury, a practice of using lethal ingredients that carried on well into the 1800s. Prostitutes

used lead makeup to hide marks on faces ravaged with disease. European women put poisonous drops into their eyes to get a more luminous, hazy look. Society ladies actually bled themselves to look pale.

Thankfully, those times are over. Today, a new outpouring of cosmetics that use organic, food-grade ingredients—most pure enough to eat—make looking beautiful not only easy, but good for you, too. This is as natural as it gets.

Starting this year, Aveda founder Horst Rechelbacher will roll out an onslaught of new products in his Intelligent Nutrients line, which had mostly been dietary supplements to date. Developed by food scientists, the line—including skin, hair, maternity, baby

and pet care products—will only use certified organic food-grade ingredients, 95 to 100 percent organic as defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In lab tests, the products have kept human cells alive for up to six months. “I don’t want to put anything on the body that doesn’t nurture or support,” Rechelbacher says.

## A Seedy Solution for Skin

Intelligent Nutrients isn’t the only line that will improve cell health. Two recent developments—still being tested—show promise when it comes to bolstering skin’s natural defenses.

Dermatologist Charles Crutchfield and oncologist Arnold Leonard, professors at the University of Minnesota, are researching how plant seed oils, in the forms of lotions and creams, can alleviate skin problems and help boost collagen in cells. Leonard discovered that the oil might have additional benefits after he started giving it to cancer patients to help them swallow potent meds. “They weren’t living that much longer, but the quality of life was greatly increased,” Crutchfield says. “So we wondered if it would work for the skin.”

So far, they’ve tested the antioxidant properties of seeds such as flax, soybean, sunflower and raspberry, among others. “They’re really anti-polluting,” Crutchfield says. “These things work like sponges that suck up all these things that cause aging.”

In the first study of 50 patients suffering from eczema and rosacea, 47 reported a marked improvement after a month. The seeds’ effectiveness as anti-inflammatories and collagen-boosting anti-agers will be tested next, and the products, CutiLotion and CutiCream, should be available over the counter within the year.

## Anti-Aging Meets Disease Prevention

But one of the most exciting remedies for aging and other diseases comes from Australia. A new anti-aging ingredient, gamma glutamyl cysteine—or GGC—is being developed to go into everyday items like dietary supplements, skin-repair creams and cosmetics.

Developed by researchers Wallace Bridge and Martin Zarka at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, GGC is a supplement that can be easily absorbed through cell membranes and converted into glutathione—the substance inside cells that maintains health and detoxifies. “If a person was to take an appropriate dose of GGC, it could help restore their cells’ glutathione to a youthful and healthy level, and consequently reduce many of the symptoms of aging,” Bridge says.

Bridge and Zarka’s more concentrated formula’s benefits will go beyond eliminating laugh lines. GGC has the potential to fight life-threatening illnesses like cancer and AIDS. Trials are planned throughout the year and, if successful, it will go into commercial production by early 2008. But GGC will be treated as a drug in the United States. Pending FDA approval, Americans will have to wait a tad longer than their Aussie counterparts for this fountain of youth.

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## The Most Unwanted List

The Environmental Working Group’s Hema Subramanian says that blood and urine tests have shown that known carcinogens and toxins in cosmetics can show up in the body. While she admits it’s a daunting task to weed out all harmful ingredients, she recommends using fewer products to curb risk.

Here are some top concerns:

**Coal Tar** Used in hair dyes, these are “widely used” in popular brands and linked to bladder cancer and immune system damage.

**Alpha Hydroxy Acids** Popular products that promise smoother, younger-looking skin have been shown to increase skin cancer risk, and in some cases, chemical burns and permanent scarring.

**Phthalates** Industrial plasticizers found in nail polish and fragrance. Studies have linked them to impaired reproductive development in baby boys who are exposed to it in the womb or through breast milk.

**Fragrance** One of the worst offenders, a fragrance can contain hundreds of different ingredients and are common allergens.

**Petroleum Distillates** Already off limits in the European Union, petroleum products are a possible carcinogen.