

Analyzing Skin Care Information as Part of the Therapeutic Dermatologic Armamentarium



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Patients are becoming increasingly savvy about their skin care product selections. They have received the message from the popular press that cleansers, moisturizers, and cosmetics hold the key to great-looking, youthful skin. Sun protection is a secondary message, but tan avoidance is rarely mentioned. Dermatologists have a unique opportunity to help patients separate the marketing fluff from the scientific stuff, but are we really doing a good job? What constitutes a good job in terms of skin care product selection? Should we simply recommend a product name? Do we need to explain why the product works or why we prefer it over others? Should we explain how to use the product? Do patients follow our recommendations? If not, why?

All of these questions are begging for answers. I wasn't really sure of the answers until I read a Harris Survey that assessed these aspects of dermatologic care. In this survey, conducted March 10-21, 2005, 422 adults who had seen a dermatologist within the preceding 12 months were polled through an online questionnaire. All were residents of the United States, 18 years of age or older, and had been diagnosed with atopic dermatitis, seborrheic dermatitis, psoriasis, eczema, hyperkeratosis, rosacea, or dry skin. Fifty-eight percent were female; 42% were male. Eighteen percent were 34 years of age or younger, 57% were aged 35 to 64 years, and 25% were aged 65 years or older.

The survey results were extensive and informative. In this article, I summarize the results that I found to be the most useful for dermatologist-patient discussions on skin care products. I have organized the survey results by each activity required to provide skin care information to the patient.

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Skin Care Recommendation Frequency

The Harris Survey results were separated by moisturizer and cleanser recommendations. Seventy-four percent of respondents stated that they had received a moisturizer recommendation from their dermatologists, but only 83% of them followed that recommendation. Cleanser recommendations were less common and interestingly stratified. Fifty-three percent of subjects received a bar soap recommendation from their dermatologists, but only 52% of them followed that recommendation. In contrast, of the 26% who received a liquid cleanser recommendation from their dermatologists, only 25% followed that recommendation.

From this information, it appears that dermatologists are compelled to recommend moisturizers over cleansers, with bar soap being the preferred cleanser to recommend. I find this intriguing because liquid cleansers are usually more sophisticated and have more advanced technology than bar cleansers. Also, the efficacy of a moisturizer is highly affected by the type of skin cleansing that precedes its application.

Skin Care Education

The next series of questions on the Harris Survey dealt with the additional information provided by the dermatologist regarding how the moisturizer or cleanser functioned. Fifty-seven percent of respondents who received a recommendation for a moisturizer had the recommendation explained, whereas only 33% who received a bar soap recommendation had that recommendation explained. Twenty-one percent who received a liquid cleanser recommendation had the recommendation explained.

When the respondents were asked whether they had received adequate information about the skin care products from their dermatologists, 47% stated that they had. This means that 53% would like more information from their dermatologists. I know this is challenging, since providing more information might mean spending unscheduled time with the patient. Yet, it appears that

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dermatologists need to better understand the skin care products they recommend so that they can provide concise but useful information to their patients.

Skin Care Recommendation Compliance

At the end of the day, I always wonder whether patients actually take my recommendations seriously. Are they just politely listening, or do they really value the extra time I spend imparting this information? Seventy-two percent of the Harris Survey respondents stated that they would purchase what their dermatologists recommended; however, the breakdown of the frequency of purchase did not necessarily reflect this response. Thirty-six percent always bought what was recommended, 31% often bought what was recommended, and 33% sometimes bought what was recommended. The most common reason cited for not purchasing a dermatologist-recommended product was cost. It is the role of the dermatologist to select products that provide value for the money invested and optimal efficacy. The cheapest skin care products may not be the best. Thus, it seems that patients are looking for their dermatologists to recommend quality, efficacious skin care products.

The other issue regarding patient compliance is the frequency of product use. If the dermatologist recommended that a moisturizer be used twice daily, did the patient follow these instructions? Forty-three percent of the respondents used the moisturizer as recommended by their dermatologists; 41% used the moisturizer, but not as recommended by their dermatologists. The most common reasons that the respondents cited for not using the moisturizer as recommended were that the product was too expensive, they forgot to use the product, and the product did not work.

Type of Skin Care Recommendation

Have you ever wondered if the form of your recommendation influenced compliance? For example, should you write down the name of the product or supply a sample? It appears from the Harris Survey that 64% of respondents received a sample of the product that their dermatologists recommended and 45% received the product name written on paper. Forty-seven percent stated that the sample they received was helpful in choosing the product that they would ultimately purchase.

Specificity of Skin Care Product Recommendation

How many recommendations should you give a patient for each product category? Should you provide 1 best cleanser recommendation or multiple recommendations

for a variety of products? The Harris Survey found that 79% of patients would like a specific product recommendation. Forty-nine percent stated that they received 1 sample product, while 35% received multiple product samples. It is important to note that 68% would follow their dermatologists' recommendation for a single product.

It appears that patients want their dermatologists' absolute best recommendations for skin care products rather than a variety of products from which to choose. If multiple skin care products are discussed, it may create the misunderstanding that all skin care products are equal and that specific recommendations may be unimportant. This then leaves the patient to select, which usually results in the purchase of the least expensive product. Trying to be helpful by offering several suggestions or trying to prevent commercial bias by selecting several competing similar products may not be well received by the patient. This finding challenges the dermatologist to personally try all the products, examining the effects for results that would be beneficial to the patient's skin condition. It raises the bar on the knowledge required for the dermatologist to pick 1 best cleanser or moisturizer for a given skin type or dermatosis.

Patient Satisfaction With Skin Care Product Recommendations

The final area of the Harris Survey that I want to discuss, which was so extensive that not all the findings could be presented, is patient satisfaction with skin care product recommendations. Do patients really feel that dermatologists possess expertise in skin care products? Regarding their doctors' recommendations, 17% of respondents were extremely satisfied, 17% were moderately satisfied, 24% were satisfied, 26% were somewhat satisfied, 8% were mildly satisfied, 3% were slightly satisfied, and 5% were not satisfied. These numbers are somewhat surprising. I interpret them to mean that dermatologists do an acceptable, but not great, job of expressing their skin care expertise. What can be done to improve these patient ratings?

I think thorough skin care knowledge is hard to obtain. I struggle with this issue myself, reading skin care industry journals for new product categories, cosmetic chemistry textbooks for novel ingredients, and the *Journal of Investigative Dermatology* for a new understanding in skin physiology, in addition to editing the *Journal of Cosmetic Dermatology* and reading new article submissions. It is a daunting task. Yet, skin care chapters are starting to appear in standard dermatology textbooks, encouraging residents to develop an interest in this important area.

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The better-educated dermatologist has more to offer to patients regarding skin care product recommendations.

Summary

The results of the Harris Survey provided insight into the missing link between my office and the store. They also reinforced in my mind the need to provide prescription medications to my patients and discuss skin care with them. An overwhelming 71% of respondents stated that they wanted guidance and advice on skin care products from their dermatologists. This is a desire the dermatologist can easily fulfill. ■