

Expensive Cosmeceuticals: Money Well Spent?

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Patients and fellow dermatologists frequently ask me whether expensive cosmeceuticals represent money well spent. Is the cream contained in the jar worth the high price, is the jar worth more than the cream, or does the real value lie in the collector's edition box? These are all excellent questions, given that the category of skin care products priced at more than \$150 is growing faster than any other in the cosmeceutical market. Compare this with the average price of \$32.50 for currently marketed cosmeceuticals. The global prestige beauty market generates \$26 billion annually, of which Western Europe accounts for \$14 billion and North America, the remaining \$12 billion. This amount is greater than the gross national product of most developing countries; it is truly staggering.

At present, it appears that the cosmeceutical market has no growth ceiling. Newer exotic and high-tech formulations continue to enter the marketplace at an astoundingly quick pace. Why do people buy these products? Does spending a lot of money on a fancy cream make them feel good? Do they think more expensive products yield better results than less expensive alternatives? Is it a yearning for youth? I am not sure. Even the best Madison Avenue marketing firms do not fully understand what it takes to create a blockbuster cosmeceutical; otherwise, all products in this segment would be hugely successful.

This column examines some of the newly popular high-priced cosmeceuticals by taking a close look at "what's in the jar" to justify the price. It is hoped that this information will help dermatologists understand this rapidly growing cosmeceutical market segment.

Sea Kelp

If you have ever gone swimming in the Pacific Ocean, you no doubt have stepped on some slimy sea kelp. Rather than wiping it from your feet, you should have rubbed

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it all over your face. Sea kelp is the pricey ingredient in a new moisturizer introduced by La Mer, an innovator in high-priced cosmeceuticals. The sea kelp is harvested off the California coast in San Diego Bay and flown to La Mer's formulation laboratories in New York, NY, where it is fermented for 4 months. Following fermentation, the kelp is placed into magnetized tubes. It is combined with cultivated algae and mixed into a cream; small jars are then filled with the cream by hand. The kelp and algae are believed to act as antioxidants and anti-inflammatories for individuals with sensitive, aging skin. The product sells for \$2100 for a 3-week supply, making it the price leader in the cosmeceutical market.

Caviar

Rather than eating that spoonful of caviar, it might be more rewarding to apply it to your face. La Prairie has developed a \$500 jar of cream that contains a rare caviar obtained from the beluga sturgeon, found in the Caspian Sea, during the natural birthing process. The caviar is supposed to have a cell format similar to that of human skin, allowing the amino acids to speed up collagen production. The high price of the caviar is due to its regulation under the US Endangered Species Act of 1973 and the fact that it must be harvested fresh and transported immediately to the laboratory for processing to preserve the amino acids. In addition to caviar, the pricey cream contains superoxide dismutase as an antioxidant.

Growth Factors

Growth factors are a huge area of research, with new sources appearing daily in the cosmeceutical realm. Plant-derived growth factors are the basis for kinetin, a product marketed to dermatologists several years ago for office dispensing. The focus has now expanded to animal-derived growth factors from either fibroblast culture media or, the most recent source, milk of nursing cows in the first 2 weeks postbirth. During that time, the milk is said to be rich in growth factors that are important in tissue formation. The growth factors apparently signal the production of collagen and elastin. These growth factors have been dehydrated to a powder that is packaged

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and frozen in tiny vials and comes with a serum. The powder is thawed and mixed with the serum before nightly facial application. The product is marketed under DDF® and sells for \$1000 for a 28-day supply.

Another cosmeceutical, marketed by RéVive® for \$1500 a jar, contains keratinocyte-growth factors in combination with telomerase. This product is said to increase keratinocyte production by 8 times over baseline. The growth factors contained in this formulation are bioengineered in the laboratory and not derived directly from plant or animal sources.

Neuropeptides

Other bioengineered raw formulations include neuropeptides. These are produced in the laboratory to mimic the effect of endogenous neurotransmitters. The production of the neuropeptides is extremely costly. One formulation found in the N.V. Perricone line costs \$15,000 a kilogram, which is enough to produce 100 bottles of the product. This neuropeptide-containing cosmeceutical sells for \$570.

Red Arctic Tocol Cranberry

A rather expensive botanical extract can be obtained from the red arctic tocol cranberry. This berry contains a complex rich in ω -3 fatty acids and vitamin E. It is said to increase the production of amino acids, thereby enhancing skin repair. This cosmeceutical is marketed by Orlane Paris and costs \$470 a jar.

Pietra

Another interesting botanical formulation is marketed by SK-II for \$300 a jar. The cream contains pietra, which

is composed of amino acids and an emollient cell-lipid complex. It is a rare raw material obtained through the fermentation of a specific yeast. Pietra was discovered during the manufacturing of sake, a Japanese alcoholic beverage. It is placed in a carefully constructed moisturizing base.

Summary

All of the high-priced creams discussed in this column contain rare ingredients that require special transport and handling to maintain their activity. Certainly, the manufacturer must pass this expense on to the consumer. The question is whether it is the rare ingredient or the other constituents of the moisturizing vehicle that produce visible improvement in facial skin. It is said that there can be no placebo-controlled studies of cosmeceuticals. This is because the vehicle is most definitely an active one. Vehicle-controlled studies remain valuable, however, since they provide a clear understanding of whether the expensive ingredient provides added skin benefits above and beyond the vehicle effect. But is this really important? If the vehicle provides all the benefit, is there any harm in creating some marketing buzz by finding a rare ingredient from the far reaches of the globe to increase the price of your product? Is this not part of the mystique of the cosmeceuticals realm? This certainly is a matter of opinion.

The dermatologist's final important task, after evaluating the formulation of these pricey cosmeceuticals, is to help the patient make an informed purchase. Know exactly what is in the jar and its monetary and cutaneous value. There is no universal definition of "money well spent." ■