

COSMECEUTICAL CRITIQUE

Update on Organics

As pressure grows on cosmetics companies to use more environmentally friendly ingredients and packaging, there has been a profound increase in organic/natural and eco claims on “green” beauty products. Terms such as botanical, natural, green, organic, and active naturals are used. Among these terms, only the term “organic” has legal requirements for its use.

There are different standards in the United States and in other countries about what “organic” means. This column will discuss the meaning of the term “organic” and the various organic certifications.



BY LESLIE S. BAUMANN, M.D.

Origin of the Term

The term “organic” as currently used was coined in 1940 by J.I. Rodale, who founded the Rodale publishing empire with the magazine “Organic Farming and Gardening.” In 1992 the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) approved the Organic Label and its accompanying standards; however, this “organic seal” applied mainly to agricultural foods and practices.

Organic Regulation

There was no recognized “organic” label for personal skin care products until 2002. In May of that year, the USDA made it clear, in a policy statement about the National Organic Program (NOP), that producers of nonfood products containing agricultural ingredients were eligible to seek certification. This policy allowed producers of nonfood items to display the iconic round, green “USDA Organic” seal to attest to “authentic” organic claims on certifiers’ labels.

In April 2004, however, the USDA issued a surprising Guidance Statement reversing this position, indicating that producers of personal care products would not be eligible to seek certification and had to cease use of the green symbol. There was wavering on this decision until August 2005, when the Organic Consumers Association, representing more than 500,000 members, won a major victory in a lawsuit against the USDA. The outcome of the lawsuit was that nonfood products could now be certified with the organic seal.

This seal offers two kinds of organic certification. If a product contains 95% organic ingredients, it can be labeled as organic. If it contains between 75% and 94% organic ingredients, it can be labeled as “made with XX% organic ingredients.” The nonorganic ingredients must also be screened to ensure they conform to the organic food standards.

Regulatory Bodies

The USDA seal is the most common, but as it really applies to food products, many new standards have been created; however, no one standard has been universally agreed upon. There are various

standards that differ from country to country. In addition, some of these standards were created by for-profit businesses that will certify products for a fee. Obviously, there is an inherent bias in this arrangement.

In Europe, one such organization that offers certification is the European Cosmetics Standards Working Group, which has developed the Cosmetics Organic Standard (COSMOS). For more information, visit www.cosmos-standard.org.

Another popular certifying organization is NaTrue from Germany (www.natrue.org). This association signed an equivalency agreement with

another certifying body in the United States known as the Natural Products Association. Now that these organizations have teamed up, they are a leading certification organization in China.

NaTrue and COSMOS appear to be the most popular certifying bodies in the United States but certification is a competitive field, and every certifying organization wants to claim to have the recognized standard. Other certifying bodies in the United States include NSF International, which was one of the first, and OASIS, which was created by a coalition of beauty product manufacturers.

Each certifying body has its own standards of what constitutes “organic,” and there are discrepancies among them. For example, some standards exclude products originating from livestock that have had any genetic engineering, whereas other standards do not.

Organic Topical Products

Although there are no long-term studies documenting the effects of using topical organic products or ingredients, consumers of organic products are typically as interested in what products do not contain as in what they do contain. The intent of the organic label is to assure consumers that the key cleansing and conditioning ingredients are derived from organically grown plants rather than conventionally grown plants, synthetic chemicals, or petroleum byproducts. In addition, topical organic products exclude or minimize any ingredients that could be considered potentially harmful to people, animals, waterways, or the environment. The rules about which ingredients can and cannot be included vary by regulatory body.

The Precautionary Principle

Sometimes certain ingredients are excluded from products on the basis of research. In other cases, exclusions are based on the “precautionary principle,” which holds that until the cumulative effects of exposures to a broad range of ingredients can be fully assessed, it is best to err on the side of caution and limit use. For example, although many chem-

ical ingredients used in cosmetics are widely considered to be safe, some safety factors have not been fully studied.

It is virtually impossible to assess the cumulative effects of repeated exposures to ingredients found in personal care products that may come from multiple sources. This is important because consumers, especially women, use several skin, hair, and beauty products per day. Typical use of a variety of products could lead to a higher combined rate of exposure than is usually assessed in safety studies. In addition, because of the use of a variety of products, the ingredients could interact, the possibility of which may not be accounted for in single-ingredient safety studies. Furthermore, to accurately establish the baseline of the chemical exposures that people can safely tolerate, it would be necessary to account for all chemical exposures from food, urban smog, industrial waste, and other sources.

Ingredient Cautions

Parabens can be absorbed via the skin and travel into the bloodstream and tissues (New Scientist.com News Service, Jan. 12, 2004). One controversial study even found high concentrations of parabens in breast cancer tissue. Products containing parabens should be avoided by most people who know they are allergic to parabens. There are no convincing data that parabens are harmful in those not allergic to this group of compounds, but many are choosing to avoid products containing this preservative ingredient.

Toluene, which is found in many brands of nail polish, has been associated with detrimental effects on males in utero. Consequently, major companies such as L’Oréal and Revlon, as well as manufacturers of natural and organic products, have taken steps to eliminate toluene from their nail polishes. Toluene can also cause a skin rash, typically on the eyelids, in people who use toluene-containing nail polishes.

Several other ingredients also warrant cautionary notes, but even organic products can cause problems. For example, coconut oil, a popular organic ingredient, can cause acne. Allergies can develop in response to many essential oils and botanicals. In addition, because companies were not able to label their products as organic until recently, there have not been enough clinical research trials on the organic products on the market.

‘Natural’ Ingredients

It is important to note that products touted as “natural” are not necessarily organic. For example, “active naturals” is a term used by Aveeno to describe ingre-

redients that are found in nature but have been improved upon in the laboratory. An example is the medicinal herb feverfew, which in the Aveeno Ultra-Calming products has had parthenolide removed. Parthenolide can lead to skin inflammation, so products containing feverfew function better as anti-inflammatories without it. Products also may contain natural ingredients such as aloe, chamomile, cucumber, or vitamin E, but if these have not been grown in the required manner, the organic seal cannot be used. In addition, “natural products” may also contain chemicals intended to act as preservatives or to improve texture.

That said, problems can, of course, be associated with ingredients that are natural or organic. For instance, many natural and organic brands contain certain fragrances and essential oils that can cause dermatitis. Organic products containing strong essential oils such as peppermint or rosemary can also irritate or inflame sensitive skin. Chamomile can induce allergies in some people (who may also tend to be allergic to wheat). Furthermore, conventional as well as some natural products contain a “perfume mix” to mask their odor. Components of the perfume mix are rarely listed on the product label because each company



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uses its own proprietary blend. Even a product listed as 95% organic could contain a perfume mix that might induce allergic reactions in some people.

The Future of Organics

Few product lines can meet the standards of the regulatory organizations, and it is expensive to meet and maintain these standards. There are a few well-made organic lines, such as Juice Beauty and Sophyto. However, organic does not equal efficacy. None of these products can come close to the results of a prescription retinoid.

At this point, organic products have not been subjected to the strict scrutiny of science to evaluate efficacy. ■

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