

Decoding beauty

Da Vinci Code? Pah! Deciphering beauty claims can have far more life-changing (well, at least skin-saving) consequences

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Mystified by cosmetics labels? You're not alone: adjective-heavy descriptions and "pseudo-scientific" claims can leave even the savviest consumer wondering whether to eat a moisturiser or nominate it for a Nobel prize. "The confusion is understandable because descriptions often mean very little and are meant to sound more important than they really are," says Dr Terrence Scamp, a Fellow of the Australasian College of Surgeons and spokesperson for SkinCeuticals. And because there are no industry standards for cosmetics definitions we don't always know when we're being misled. "Overall, the policing of cosmetic claims is inconsistent and difficult to enforce," says Dr Adrian Lim, of the Australasian College of Dermatologists. Of course, reputable cosmetics companies invest serious money into research to earn our trust, but ultimately it's our responsibility to understand what we're really buying at the beauty counter. We'll get you started by deciphering some common claims on beauty bottles and jars - and what they mean for you.



Oil-free

DEFINITION: Er, no added oil

Ask any dermatologist and they'll tell you: it's very difficult to make most cosmetics without oil-like ingredients – they're needed to give products a silky feel or to bind ingredients.

"The label oil-free usually means the products are free of mineral oil [derived from crude oil] which is commonly used in mass-market skincare products as it's an inexpensive emollient," says Vivien Gardiner from Jan Marini Skin Research. "Quality clinical brands don't usually include mineral oil."

To most of us the word "oil" means vegetable oils like soya, or mineral oil says Will Evans, founder of

The Purist Company. "But many man-made oily ingredients such as isopropyl myristate are used in cosmetic formulations and aren't considered by the manufacturer as an 'oil'." So the label "oil-free" can get slapped on products that are anything but, making it a fairly meaningless term. In fact, it can even mislead you into buying products containing ingredients that can aggravate breakouts. Some of the usual pore-clogging suspects: isopropyl esters, oleic acid, stearic acid, petrolatum and lanolin fatty acids.

So if you have oily, blemish-prone skin, become a label reader. The back of the label that is. Scan the ingredients list, and if any of the above suspects feature in the first five listed ingredients (ie, the ones that make up the bulk of the product), put it down and back away.

TRUTH OR DARE

Cosmetics aren't drugs, so they're out of the jurisdiction of the Therapeutic Goods Administration. However, beauty manufacturers are still obliged to tell the truth: the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission spokesperson, Lin Enright, says a company can be penalised under the Trade Practices Act if it's found to be deliberately misleading. Phew.

Hypoallergenic

DEFINITION: Less likely to trigger allergies or cause irritation

Sounds great... in theory. In reality, it's not that simple. "Anyone can be allergic to anything," says Emma Hobson, education manager at the International Dermal Institute. "Some people are allergic to the environment and live in a bubble! So you can't guarantee a product won't cause an allergy or sensitive skin reaction." Because cosmetic manufacturers aren't required to substantiate claims, "hypoallergenic" can pretty much mean whatever they'd like – and the same goes for "allergy tested" and "good for sensitive skin." Oh good.

But it's not entirely misleading. There's a list of the top 30 ingredients that people are most likely to be allergic to, which cosmetic manufacturers refer to – and avoid when formulating "hypoallergenic" products.

Some companies, like Clinique, have gone even further and built their reputations on avoiding allergenic ingredients. "Every single product we have is allergy tested," says Michael Ingrassia, senior scientist for Clinique. "Every formula is applied 12 times to 600 people, and if even one of those 7200 applications has a reaction – any slight redness or irritation – we go back and reformulate. If it doesn't work at a clinical level, we can't put a claim on a box." Now that's the kind of attention to detail we appreciate.

If your skin flares up easily, one of the most effective tactics is to use as few skincare products as possible. And again, get to know your ingredients – check out cosmeticscop.com.au for an exhaustive dictionary of cosmetics ingredients and their properties. Dr Leslie Baumann, author of *The Skin Type Solution* (\$17.99, Bantam) recommends trying products at the beauty counter or taking home samples before you make a

purchase (especially an expensive one!). Not every reaction is instantaneous, so sit tight for at least 24 hours before you make a decision.

Fragrance-free

DEFINITION: No added fragrance

"One of the main recognised category of ingredients that cause irritation and allergies is artificial fragrance," says Hobson. "In addition, it can cause photo-damage and hyperpigmentation on the skin." So choosing unperfumed products is a no-brainer if you've got sensitive skin. Unfortunately, getting hold of them isn't: "Fragrance-free doesn't mean 100 per cent fragrance-free," says Dr Lim. Turns out, it usually means no *extra* perfume has been added. Products labelled "fragrance-free" or "unscented" typically have less than one per cent fragrance – usually to mask the offensive odours of the product's other ingredients (moisturiser that smells like petroleum, anyone? Yeah, we thought not). It can also mean a product doesn't exude a noticeable aroma, but could still contain fragrant plant oils or extracts.

Try sniffing a fragrance-free product – does it have an aroma? Yes? Don't stress. What you smell is probably one of the natural ingredients, like lavender or grapefruit seed – a natural preservative.

According to Dr Lim, most of us will tolerate fragrance without any problems. And as cosmetic companies are increasingly aware that it's often those with sensitive skin who shop for sweet-smelling goods, products undergo more safety checks than a bungee cord to ensure they won't irritate or cause allergic reactions. One such company is L'Occitane, which conducts tests on volunteers in an independent laboratory approved by the French Ministry of Health, with results validated by a dermatologist. "If a L'Occitane product is labelled >>

NOT-SO-NATURAL

Yep, it's another extremely hazy, unregulated term: "There are about as many definitions of 'natural' as there are people who ask," says Will Evans of The Purist Company. And keep in mind that after a substance is extracted from a plant, preserved and mixed with other natural (and unnatural) ingredients, it's a long way from its raw state. But some dermatologists question our current preoccupation with "natural" products, pointing out that just because something grows in a tree, it doesn't necessarily mean it's good for skin – and vice versa. But if you want something Mama Nature would at least recognise, scan the ingredients list. If it's as long and scary looking as a periodic table, it's probably as natural as Pamela Anderson's cleavage. You've been warned.



THE LABEL "OIL-FREE" CAN MISLEAD YOU INTO BUYING PRODUCTS THAT CAN ACTUALLY AGGRAVATE BREAKOUTS

Misleading claims can be a pain in the bum >>>

'fragrance free' we haven't added any scent, but they may have a natural fragrance," says Rose Rae, L'Occitane national trainer. "Some natural ingredients have a scent that consumers find unappealing, so we may add fragrance to make the product more pleasant. However we won't add fragrance to any products designed for sensitive skins as this could irritate."

Dermatologist tested

DEFINITION: A dermatologist has been involved at some stage in product development

"Ideally this would mean a product had undergone a trial by a dermatologist, with the results published in a peer-reviewed journal," says Dr Scamp. But, er, it doesn't. In fact, this label doesn't mean much. The "test" could be anything from passing the product to a few staff for self-evaluation to more legitimate controlled trials. When it's done right, a large-scale study of carefully selected, randomised volunteers will be carried out.

Dr Lim says this label usually refers to allergy testing, but could mean SPF testing in sunscreens or testing for the irritation potential of a product. "Many of these

tests could actually be carried out without dermatology supervision," he adds.

To find out how valid the claims are, check the package insert to see if it outlines the role the dermatologist played in the testing. Also, a report with the dermatologist's signature should be available for review.

Supervised testing of cosmetic products is enormously valuable, particularly if you've got reactive skin. But remember that your skin may react differently to those involved in the testing process. Our advice? If you're unsure, always do a skin patch test of any new product before slapping it on your skin.

Noncomedogenic

DEFINITION: Less likely to block pores or cause black or white heads

Comedones may sound like something you'd buy in ribbed or glow in the dark, but they're actually whiteheads, blackheads or any kind of congested pore. Definitely something you want to avoid.

Noncomedogenic products, therefore, should be formulated with no known pore-clogging ingredients,

or at least contain only a very low percentage (some ingredients only block pores in large enough quantities).

"There's no specific test for this, but the general principle is to substitute heavy occlusive oils with lighter creams and lotions to reduce the likelihood of blocked pores," says Dr Lim. Back to label scanning: Dr Baumann says the skincare ingredients to avoid if you're pimple prone are cinnamon oil, cocoa butter, cocos nucifera (coconut oil), peppermint oil, isopropyl isostearate, isopropyl myristate and sodium laurel sulfate.

"Products that cause clogging of the follicles are usually thicker and don't contain active "de-clogging" agents such as vitamin A or alpha and beta hydroxy acids," adds Gardiner. "Well-formulated products will always be non-comedogenic." Keep an eye out for lotions that are water-based rather than thick, oil-based formulations.

And a tip from Dermalogica experts – if you go to a skin specialist for extractions, ask to see the gunk that comes from your congested pores. Sometimes you can tell what's causing the blockage from the colour. For example, if it's brown it could be your foundation or bronzer causing your congestion. Ingenious, huh?

Organic

DEFINITION: Any substance containing carbon

This label takes more of a battering than any other. You might think you're buying something made with ingredients from an organic farm; the manufacturer might simply be reasoning that mineral oil counts as organic because it's a derivative of crude oil. There's currently no single regulatory board for certifying beauty products, so it's a complete free-for-all. Even if there's only 0.01 per cent organic ingredients included in the product, the label can state it's organic. "There's a world of difference between the terms 'organic' and 'certified organic'," explains Evans. Fortunately, an overhaul in certification is being rolled out over the next couple of years. Until then there are a few things to be aware of if you want to go organic.

Start by looking for companies who have a reputation as suppliers of quality natural-based beauty products, like The Purist Company, Dr Hauschka and Weleda.

"The best way to buy genuine organic products is to make an effort to understand which symbols on labels are bound by technical standards, and which aren't," says Dr Andrew Monk, chair of Australia's largest organic representative group, Biological Farmers of Australia (BFA). If it's 100 per cent organic you're after, look for the Australian Certified Organic A-grade "Bud" logo (as above) – this means a producer has invested three years in ensuring their farm and methods are organic.

Antipodes is a 100 per cent certified organic range that goes the extra distance by having its products inspected and certified at every stage of production, from the cultivation and processing of ingredients to packaging, storage and delivery. Founder Elizabeth Babalich explains the popularity of going green: "I think that natural products formulated with pure plant ingredients fundamentally feed your skin. It's just like your diet, if you're feeding your body with a good balance of essential fats, protein and everything else, then you'll look and feel healthy." Amen to that. **WH**

"DERMATOLOGIST TESTED" CAN JUST MEAN THE PRODUCT'S BEEN PASSED TO A FEW STAFF



PICK OF THE BEST

Oil-free



Maybelline NY Pure Makeup, \$15.50



Revlon: ColorStay Makeup with Softflex, \$35.95



Laura Mercier Oil Free Primer, \$62

Hypoallergenic



Garnier Clean Sensitive Anti-tightness Cleansing Milk, \$9.99



Clinique Dramatically Different Moisturizing Lotion, \$359



Lancôme Hydra Zen Neurocalm Eye Contour Gel Cream, \$80

Fragrance-free



Avene Trixera Emollient and Cleansing Gel, \$35



L'Occitane: Ultra Comforting Mask (Shea & Organic Cotton), \$39.95



Biotherm Biosensitive Soothing Balancing Gel-cream Moisturiser, \$79

Dermatologist tested



SkinCeuticals C E Ferulic Antioxidant Treatment, \$146.90



Jan Marini Bioglycolic Facial Cleanser, \$55



Nivea Visage Vital Triple Action Soy+ Intensive Serum, \$19.95

Noncomedogenic



Pevonia Myoxy-Caviar Timeless Eye Contour, \$337



Almay Pure Blends Mineral Makeup, \$29.95



Clarins Hydraquench Intensive Serum Bi-Phase, \$68

Organic



Antipodes Hallelujah Lime & Patchouli Cleanser, \$58



Trilogy Certified Organic Rosehip Oil, \$34.95



Shizen Certified Organic Rose Hydrating Mist, \$24.95