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SKIN DEEP

Natural, Organic Beauty

By NATASHA SINGER

FOR Flavia Kawaja, an interior designer in Manhattan, a trip to the beauty department at Whole Foods Market comes not with a shopping list but with a mental list of what synthetic ingredients to avoid.

Ms. Kawaja won't use antiperspirant made with aluminum derivatives, in case the urban legend that they could cause diseases like [Alzheimer's](#) turns out to be true. She also steers clear of skin-care products with parabens, common antibacterial agents used as preservatives in some cosmetics, drugs and foods.

Although there have been no rigorous large-scale prospective clinical trials to show that parabens in cosmetics represent a risk to beauty consumers, a few studies have shown that exposure to parabens can cause reproductive changes in lab rodents.

By choosing cosmetics marketed as natural or organic, Ms. Kawaja errs on the side of caution. Even so, she admits that she's unsure whether her careful choice of natural shampoos and sunscreens translates into health benefits.

"I don't assume that organic automatically means good for you," she said. "I mean, if you fry an organic potato, it's still a French fry."

Organic connoisseurs have long made a practice of reading food labels to weed out those grown with pesticides or that contain synthetic colors, flavors or preservatives. Now, in the wake of recent health scares over tainted pet food and toothpaste, some beauty mavens are seeking synthetic-free cosmetics in the belief that products made without industrial ingredients like petrochemicals ought to be healthier for you.

These newly minted label inspectors are fueling a boom in so-called natural and organic personal care products. Natural cosmetics market themselves as containing plant or mineral ingredients; organic products say they are made with agricultural ingredients grown without pesticides.

During the 12 months through Sept. 9, Americans spent \$150 million on the top three mass-market natural personal care brands, including Burt's Bees, Jason Natural Cosmetics and Tom's of Maine, an increase of \$51 million over the year before, according to Information Resources Inc., a market research firm. Meanwhile, sales of organic personal care items reached \$350 million last year, an increase of \$68 million over 2005, according to manufacturers' data compiled by the Organic Trade Association, an industry group.

"We're seeing an increased consciousness that what you put on your body is as important as what goes in your body," said Jeremiah McElwee, the senior coordinator in charge of personal care at Whole Foods, which is the company's fastest-growing department. "The biggest impetus for buying natural or organic body care is the perceived health benefit."

It would seem logical to assume that common ingestible ingredients like olives or soy would naturally be healthier for the skin and body than hard-to-pronounce, multisyllabic industrial cosmetic ingredients like the preservative methylchloroisothiazolinone. But representatives for the government and the beauty industry, as well as some environmental activists, acknowledge that there is no published scientific proof to support the notion that plant-based cosmetics are safer, healthier or more effective for people.

“Consumers should not necessarily assume that an ‘organic’ or ‘natural’ ingredient or product would possess greater inherent safety than another chemically identical version of the same ingredient,” Dr. Linda M. Katz, the director of the Food and Drug Administration’s Office of Cosmetics and Colors, wrote in an e-mail message to this reporter. “In fact, ‘natural’ ingredients may be harder to preserve against microbial contamination and growth than synthetic raw materials.”

The confusion over the “truthiness” of the natural personal care market also stems from the lack of national standards.

The F.D.A., which regulates cosmetics, has never imposed standard definitions for marketing terms like natural and organic as they apply to grooming products, Dr. Katz said via e-mail. So manufacturers are free to use such terms on everything from a synthetic-based shampoo with one plant derivative to a synthetic-free face powder formulated with only minerals.

The agency requires manufacturers to ensure that cosmetics are safe for their intended use. But the agency leaves it up to manufacturers to decide which safety and efficacy tests to perform on ingredients and finished products.

John Bailey, the executive vice president for science of the Cosmetic, Toiletry and Fragrance Association, a trade group in Washington, said cosmetics are safe, whether their formulas contain synthetics or plants.

“On the most fundamental level, they are held to the same legal and regulatory standards,” said Dr. Bailey, who has a Ph.D. in chemistry.

But Jane Houlihan, the vice president for research of the Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit group in Washington, said the lack of established federal standards is responsible for consumer confusion over whether natural products provide tangible advantages or are simply a sop to green mind-sets.

“Even if a beauty product claims it is purely from the earth, you need to read the ingredient label,” Ms. Houlihan said.

Ms. Houlihan said increased consumer interest in natural products is driving a few manufacturers to include exotic plants in formulas that lack an established track record in the beauty industry. For example, she said, her group could not find published safety data on newer cosmetic ingredients like West Indian rosewood bark oil and white peony flower extract.

“Just because an ingredient comes from a plant does not necessarily make it safe to use in a cosmetic,” Ms. Houlihan said. “Tobacco, hemlock and poison ivy are all examples of plants that can be hazardous.”

Indeed, some dermatologists said that even natural ingredients that seem benign can cause skin allergies. For example, Dr. David A. Kiken, a chief dermatology resident at the school of medicine at the University of

California, San Diego, said he had seen skin irritation caused by tea tree oil, chamomile and green tea in cosmetics.

“Although the term natural botanical extracts inherently purports to have beneficial and benign properties, these extracts can cause adverse reactions in individuals,” Dr. Kiken wrote in a paper published in the American Journal of Contact Dermatitis.

In the absence of F.D.A. standards, dozens of beauty companies and stores are using words like botanical, herbal, natural, pure and organic to market brands, each using its own in-house definition.

For example, on www.sephora.com, the company distinguishes between botanical brands that use some plant ingredients; natural brands that eschew synthetic preservatives, colors and fragrances; and organic brands that employ some plant ingredients grown without pesticides.

Other brands style themselves as organic to signal ultimate wholesomeness. Even then, definitions vary widely. Some beauty companies simply employ organic in their brand names. Others promote certain ingredients that have been vetted by private companies that inspect organic foods.

A few brands — including Origins and Nature’s Gate — have even received certification for some products from the National Organic Program, the division of the Department of Agriculture whose logo appears on certified [organic food](#) products. Cosmetics are eligible to use such food seals if they contain at least 95 percent of certified organic ingredients that are agricultural products made from livestock or crops, grown and processed without chemical fertilizers, pesticides, growth hormones and [antibiotics](#).

But people should not interpret even the U.S.D.A. Organic seal — www.ams.usda.gov/nop/FactSheets/Backgrounder.html — on cosmetics as proof of health benefits or of efficacy, said Joan Shaffer, a department spokeswoman. Government-accredited certifiers simply vet the manner in which these food ingredients are grown and processed, just as they would for a jar of organic tomato sauce, she said.

“The National Organic Program is a marketing program, not a safety program,” Ms. Shaffer said, likening the department’s organic seal to its grading system for beef. “Steak may be graded prime, but that has no bearing on whether it is safe or nutritious to eat.”