

WUTTKE GROUP

Does Natural Mean it Is Safe?

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In previous articles, we've looked at how to assess the quality of ingredients, the integrity of the manufacturing processes, and the ethics of framing practices. But of course the most fundamental issue to determining the quality of a product is the ingredients themselves.

The Days of Snake Oil

A little over a century ago, food, drugs and cosmetics were completely unregulated. It was the wild west, and not only did very little of what people bought do what it said on the label, it often didn't even truthfully disclose what was in the bottle.

Rules and Regulations

Lack of regulations allowed toxic products to hurt consumers, and the subsequent distrust consumers feel hurts companies. The FDA and its counterparts in other countries have created clear guidelines for companies to adhere to, creating more confident and safer marketplaces. However, the system is far from perfect. At minimum, the sheer vastness of synthetic compounds now used in skin care products has multiplied the possibility of unhealthy or toxic interactions with each other and our bodies. Moreover, the FDA holds cosmetic ingredients to less stringent standards than food products.

It's all Latin to me

Ingredient lists are meant to level the playing field, compelling all manufacturers use the same terminology to describe the contents of their products. The INCI (International Nomenclature of Cosmetic Ingredients) standard, which is now used, does exactly this, but that's not to say that ingredient lists can't still be misleading. Many ingredients that are considered safe in cosmetics contain harmful chemicals using innocuous sounding pseudonyms. Other ingredients are so pervasive as to imply harmlessness when in fact they may be toxic on their own or in conjunction with other chemicals. Again, the lesson here is for the consumer to arm themselves with a basic understanding of what is safe and what contraindications may exist for certain ingredients.

A Helping Hand

When the majority of consumers are understandably overwhelmed by the task of interpreting the benefits and dangers of different ingredients, it makes it hard for responsible companies to differentiate their product. Add the misleading marketing messages of lesser quality brands, and it becomes almost impossible for the better quality products to stand out. What would you do?

In an effort to inform consumers, some companies have provided clearer explanations and simple lists that consumers can use to scrutinize the labels on their products. For example, Whole Foods provides a list of "Unacceptable ingredients" online, which shoppers can bring with them to the store to compare to potential purchases (www.wholefoods.com/pdfs/unacceptable-bodycare.pdf).

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Founded by Stacy Malkin, The Campaign for Safe Cosmetics has made tremendous strides on behalf of consumers to raise awareness about the gaps in the current system and organizing consumers to take action for the better. Read more at www.safecosmetics.org. Her blog also provides consumers with helpful information on strides toward safety as well as better choices we can all make today to bring safer products into our homes. (www.notjustaprettyface.org)

Knowledge is Power

No one expects consumers to become chemists overnight, or to have a physician's understanding of the interactions of chemicals. And we're no longer in the wild-west days of snake oil, after all. There are agencies. There are guidelines. There are rules. But the limits of those rules are routinely tested, ingredients that are "only a little toxic" pass muster, and many companies continue to make it their business to mince words, even the words in the dreaded ingredients list.

Market regulation has brought us a long way toward safe markets and transparent manufacturing processes. But ultimately, smarter consumers will take us the rest of the way toward a future where only companies that prioritize the well being of their customer's health over everything else can thrive.

Mark Wuttke heads the Wuttke Group, LLC, a world-class business development team with a focus on sustainable luxury, spa, boutique retail, organic luxury and the emerging category of eco-chic. Mark is an editorial advisory board member of Organic Spa Magazine, and works closely with LOHAS, Green Spa Network, and Natural Beauty Summit in America & Europe.
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