



Is this natural?

Skincare claims can be confusing unless you know what you're looking for

There are many good reasons for choosing organic skincare. You may have very sensitive skin. You may want to reduce your exposure to chemicals. You may be concerned about the environment and want to support chemical-free farming

The problem is that the skincare you choose may not be as organic as you think.

“More and more cosmetic companies are jumping on the bandwagon and including the word ‘organic’ on their labels,” says Narelle Chenery, creator of the Certified Organic Miessence skin care range. “Most of us would assume that means ‘grown and cultivated without the use of chemicals’. Unfortunately, some companies are basing their claim on the chemistry definition of organic, which is any substance containing carbon. In this context, you could argue that the toxic petrochemical preservative methyl paraben is both ‘natural’ and ‘organic’ because it is made from crude oil, and this is a naturally occurring carbon compound.”

Another challenge to ‘going organic’ is the fact that manufacturers are not compelled to disclose the organic content of their products. For example, while the term ‘organic herbal extracts’ might suggest a significant organic content, it could actually be as low as 0.5%. Even if the herbs themselves are organic, the alcohol or other liquid used to suspend the extract is unlikely to be.

Impossibly high standards

“Few people realise that a 100% organic skin cream is very difficult to achieve,” says Sharon McGlinchey, holistic beauty therapist and creator of MV Organic Skincare. “The problem lies in emulsifying oils and water to make a cream. All emulsifiers are to some extent synthetic and, therefore, not organic. The alternative, cold formulating, is only really an option if you have your own manufacturing facility and, even then, the process doesn’t suit all formulations.”

McGlinchey can achieve 99 per cent organic content in her facial oil blends, which don’t need to be emulsified, while her creams are up around 85 per cent.

This makes official recognition difficult. The more closely-regulated food sector will only certify products with an organic content of 95 per cent or more. Products with at least 70 per cent organic content can be 'approved' but, as yet, approval by an Australian certifying body carries no weight internationally. The Soil Association in the UK offers the same system of certification and approval and, at the moment, theirs is the most comprehensive and widely-recognised cosmetic standard in the world. This persuaded McGlinchey, who plans to start exporting the MV product range this year, to apply for Soil Association certification.

This is not an easy process.

"In the first place, my own bookwork has to be open to regular audits," she explains. "The auditors are looking for proof that I use organically certified ingredients, that nothing's genetically engineered and that there are no petrochemicals in the formulation."

The next challenge is finding a like-minded manufacturer.

"They have to be prepared to do whatever it takes to meet the guidelines, and that could mean big changes to the way they usually operate" says McGlinchey. "It's not only a question of sourcing organic ingredients – the Soil Association won't accept any manufacturing processes which interfere with the integrity of the raw ingredients. So, if a manufacturer routinely uses radiation to kill bacteria, this would have to change.

"It's a big ask – and you need to be able to trust your manufacturer completely. If mine failed to comply with any detail laid down in the regulations, I would lose my certification – and I'd have wasted thousands of dollars in the process."

You are what you absorb

Is all of this effort worth it? Is what we put on our skin really so important? Absolutely, says naturopath Anthia Koullouros, owner of Sydney's Ovvio – The Organic Lifestyle Store.

"Even people who are really careful about what they eat tend to overlook the impact of what they put on their skin," she says, "yet the skin is a very effective organ of absorption, and chemicals can be carried right through the body."

Recent research showed just how quickly this can happen. Within 24 hours of applying a lead solution to the skin of mice, scientists found large increases in the amount of lead in the muscles, pancreas, spleen, kidney, liver, caecum, bone, heart and brain.

"Everything we touch has the potential to affect our whole system, so it makes sense to cut down the chemicals wherever we can," adds Koullouros. "That's why I stock organic cotton sheets, underwear and baby clothes as well as foods and products for health and beauty."

When Claudia Jones* first tried organic skin care, she was in search of something - anything – that would help with her sudden-onset adult acne. “I was desperately trying to fall pregnant, so I was eating well and taking care of myself – perhaps my skin was reacting to the stress. All I know is that it looked terrible!

“I’d spent a fortune on every product and treatment imaginable but my skin just kept getting worse,” she continues. “It got to the point where I was embarrassed to go out.”

Within three months of starting treatment with MV organic products, her skin was completely clear. Two years later, it’s still so healthy that she rarely wears make-up. “At first, it didn’t occur to me to see whether a product was organic. Now I wouldn’t dream of using anything else.”

Making the right choice

So you’d like to try organic skin care – how can you be sure it’s the real thing?

“Misleading label claims are so common that we felt the need to point out we have ‘nothing to hide’ in our ingredient listing.” says Belinda Murray, principal of Haven Scent Organic Skin Food. “To be sure of what you’re buying you really do need to go straight past the marketing tactics to the full list of ingredients. If organic content is not stated as a percentage, or the individual organic ingredients are not listed, you can be reasonably sure you’re looking at a ‘token’ organic product rather than a ‘serious’ one.”

**Not her real name*

Breakout box

Labels that say it all

Surprisingly few skin care manufacturers are certified organic, or disclose the organic content of their products. Here are some to look out for.

Haven Scent A complete ingredients list includes percentages of certified organic, organic and other natural ingredients. www.havenscent.com.au

Nancy Evans Certified Organic Rosehip Skincare The range is certified organic by The Organic Food Chain Pty Ltd. www.rosehipskincare.com

mv Organic Skincare Every ingredient is listed and the organic content is stated as a percentage www.mvskincare.com.au

Miessence™ The Miessence organic product range is certified by the USDA and BFA. www.onegrp.com/?biorganic

Dr.Hauschka Skin Care Dr.Hauschka Skin Care products are certified by the BDIH.
www.drhauschka.com.au

*USDA - US Department of Agriculture; BFA Biological Farmers of Australia; BDIH -
Bunderverband Deutscher Industrie und Handelsunternehmen – German Federal
Association of Industrial and Commercial Companies.*