

## Vanity Fair

Organic personal care products defined | by Vicky Uhland



Stroll through the personal care section of any small natural foods retailer or even a nationally known supermarket, and you'll see the word "organic" everywhere. Here, bottles of a shampoo that you've used for years suddenly bear stickers claiming to be "70 percent organic." There, all manner of eye creams may be labeled "82 percent organic." Every-

thing from deodorant to toothpaste has gone organic, and, if you're confused about what those labels mean, get in line.

How can you, the consumer, make informed decisions about the products that carry organic labels? Are there laws governing label accuracy? Does the word "organic" on, say, a cherry-flavored lip gloss or banana-

scented sunscreen carry the same weight as the government-sanctioned "organic" label that appears on real cherries and bananas?

Not yet—which is what makes shopping for personal care products these days so baffling. The organic label approved by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) in October 2002 established national standards for organic claims on all foods, removing a great deal of inconsistency and confusion. But the law applies only to food—or more specifically, to the processes by which food is grown and handled.

The law does not govern ingredients in personal care products, however, except in a few cases. When a product contains at least 95 percent organic foods—and most personal care products do not—it, too, can carry the USDA organic seal. Recognizing that it is difficult for personal care products to meet this standard, California—the only state that has issued organic standards for toiletries and cosmetics—enacted an organic-products law in January 2003, allowing products containing at least 70 percent certified organic ingredients to carry a state-approved organic seal.

But because the federal law does not apply to personal care products, manufacturers whose products may contain some organically grown ingredients choose to call these products organic, though the percentages of organic ingredients in them may vary widely—and wildly.

There may be companies who throw in one or two organic ingredients among petrochemicals and then

▼ label the whole product organic, says Samuel Epstein, MD, chairman of the Chicago-based Cancer Prevention Coalition and professor emeritus of environmental and occupational medicine at the University of Illinois School of Public Health.

Conversely, some companies follow their own strict guidelines. For example, Avalon Natural Products uses plants that farmers have grown organically according to the National Organic Program, says Brand Manager Tim Schaeffer.

But the inconsistency with which companies label their products organic has led to a robust debate inside the personal care products industry. Until the debate is settled and product manufacturers voluntarily agree to standards, or until they must abide by laws that establish standards, consumers will have to base their shopping decisions on trust in the manufacturers or in the stores that sell their products, which is not always a bad thing.

The rapport you develop with the proprietor of your local health food store can often be as valuable as the information on any label—and obviously more personal. Knowledgeable retailers, having tried many of their items they sell, can make distinctions among all the products that compete for your attention and money, and then they can make recommendations.

These products, of course, are made by manufacturers small and large who operate in regulated business environments and through professional associations that represent their interests, often in opposition to the interests of others. These varied interest groups are now debating the standards by which the organic integrity of personal care products should be evaluated. One such group is the Organic Consumers Associa-

tion (OCA), based in Little Marais, Minnesota. The OCA is convinced that some manufacturers are labeling their products organic when the majority of their ingredients are synthetically produced or contain petrochemicals. Therefore, the OCA is lobbying for a label that mirrors the label used on USDA-certified foods. It's a standard many in the industry consider unrealistically rigid.

### Water, Water Everywhere

Such a standard would be too difficult for many products to meet, says Steve Byckiewicz, owner and co-founder of Kiss My Face, the Gardiner, New York-based manufacturer of the Obsessively Organic skin care line and Sudz natural soaps. One reason this standard is too high, Byckiewicz believes, is that shampoo, water-based lotions and some other personal care products are mainly liquids, and the USDA does not count water when calculating the percentage of a product's organic ingredients. Another reason is that shampoos must contain lathering ingredients, and effective foaming agents are synthetic.

Because of these factors, the only personal care line to carry the USDA seal is Aubrey Organics' Natural Spa Sea Wonders, which consists mainly of oils. Concentrated oil- or wax-based products can qualify under the USDA's National Organic Program because they are made mainly of ingredients extracted from organically grown plants—which, at this time, is a problem for lathering shampoos.

Although the USDA does not consider water an ingredient in personal care products, California does count floral waters. Also known as hydrosols, floral waters are the condensation that is collected after plants are steamed to extract their

## Pure and Natural

Keep yourself, as well as the planet, healthy by using natural products. You can find the following items—formulated with natural and organic ingredients—at your local health food store.

- **Organic Lip Repair** from Kiss My Face. Organic ingredients smooth and soothe chapped lips quickly with this 62 percent organic, cruelty-free treatment that contains no artificial colors or unnecessary chemicals. 800.262.KISS; [www.kissmyface.com](http://www.kissmyface.com)
- **Tea Tree and Blue Cypress Deodorant** from Nature's Gate Organics. Contains witch hazel, juniper berry, echinacea and rosemary for their antiseptic and anti-bacterial properties to provide non-irritating, effective protection. 800.327.2012; [www.levlad.com](http://www.levlad.com)
- **Natural Spa Sea Wonders Invigorating Body Polish** from Aubrey Organics. Formulated with aloe vera, rosemary and spearmint, and made only from USDA-certified organic ingredients, this polish gently smooths away dead skin cells. 800.282.7394; [www.aubrey-organics.com](http://www.aubrey-organics.com)
- **Shaving Gel** from Jurlique. Contains avocado, macadamia and rosewood oils to help soften facial hair for an easier shave. Comes in a foam gel formula. 800.854.1110; [www.jurlique.com](http://www.jurlique.com)
- **Organic Glycerin Soap Bars** from Avalon Organic Botanicals. Created with the traditional slow-cook kettle process. Available in Lavender, Mint Thyme, Lemon Verbena and Rosemary to gently cleanse, nourish and moisturize. 800.227.5120; [www.avalonnaturalproducts.com](http://www.avalonnaturalproducts.com)



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essential oils. If the plants are organic, the hydrosols are considered organic, and their use, therefore, enables some personal care product manufacturers to claim a higher percentage of organic ingredients. Because of this, the OCA, in another controversial move, has asked the state of California to reconsider its ruling on hydrosols.

Many personal care products consist mainly of floral waters, the OCA contends, implying that the policy gives such products an advantage in the marketplace. "Consumers deserve answers about the percentage of floral waters," says OCA National Director Ronnie Cummins, contending that some floral waters are made from ordinary tap water. "Floral waters that may contain some amount of organic plant water can be counted under existing National Organic Program food standards as organic when added to another product, but only if that content can be determined. But if this is too impractical, then floral waters should not count at all."

"Hydrosols are not the only organic ingredients that we use," says Jeffrey Light, founder and chairman of Jason Natural Cosmetics. "We also use organic aloe vera gel, sunflower oil, jojoba oil and tea tree oil, to name a few." Byckiewicz adds that hydrosols are made with the same amount of raw plant material as many other organic personal care ingredients.

Equally as active in the debate as the OCA is the Greenfield, Massachusetts-based Organic Trade Association (OTA), formed in 1985, which advised the USDA in the development of its National Organic Program.

Manufacturers that make up OTA's 25-member personal care standards task force are split on the

hydrosols issue, says Tom Hutcheson, OTA's associate policy director. If hydrosols are allowed, Hutcheson says, "estimates range from 20 percent to 100 percent of the water in a hydrosol would be from the plant." The task force, which includes representatives from Aubrey Organics, Aveda, Avalon and Jason, has been meeting for 2 years without agreeing on organic standards for personal care products, and OTA Executive Director Katherine DiMatteo says it may take several more years before the group can come to an agreement.

### Shelf Life

Another area of difficulty for personal care products is the use of preservatives. The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulates the acceptable levels of preservatives in personal care products, but many manufacturers otherwise committed to using organic ingredients have had a hard time finding organic alternatives to synthetic preservatives.

The most popular synthetic preservatives are methyl-, propyl- or butylparaben, which are combinations of alcohol and parahydroxybenzoic acid. At excessive levels, these preservatives have been known to carry health risks. Results of a 1998 study conducted by the Department of Biology and Biochemistry at England's Brunel University and published in *Pure Applied Chemistry* found that parabens can produce small amounts of estrogen that are absorbed through the skin.

Because excess estrogen has been linked to breast cancer, some personal care product manufacturers are reluctant to use parabens. However, some feel that synthetic preservatives are unavoidable because a water-based product with no preservatives, or one with all-natural preservatives, would have a very short shelf life, or

## Why Organic Ingredients Matter

Why does it matter whether your personal care products are made with organic ingredients or not? Because those that aren't can be harmful, says Samuel Epstein, MD, chairman of the Chicago-based Cancer Prevention Coalition and professor emeritus of environmental and occupational medicine at the University of Illinois School of Public Health. "Mainstream industry products are highly dangerous," Epstein says. "Consumers have got to be fully aware of the fact that mainstream industry products carry a wide range of ingredients that are carcinogenic or allergenic."

Shampoos, skin creams and other products applied directly to the skin can be especially troublesome. Any product "absorbed by the skin is directly absorbed," says Elizabeth Smith, MD, a researcher with the Ovarian Cyst Education Web site. "In other words, anything absorbed through the skin may be as high as 10 times the concentration of an oral dose." That's why you must be careful with products containing synthetic ingredients—especially on children. "Infants are highly vulnerable to toxic and carcinogenic effects," says Epstein, citing clinical rodentian studies done in 1972 and 1986, published in *Cancer Research* and the *Journal of Carcinogenesis*, respectively. Both studies show that an application of carcinogens in the

first few days of life can be 50–100 times more toxic than it is for adults.

Natural products manufacturers say that organic ingredients can perform the same functions as synthetic ingredients but without the health risks. Jeffrey Light, Jason Natural Cosmetics' founder and chairman, says his company uses essential oils such as lavender and lemon to replace synthetic fragrances. And the company uses aloe vera gel and sea algae to replace animal-derived lanolin. Jason's toothpastes contain menthol to soothe sensitive teeth instead of potassium nitrate, a skin irritant, which some other manufacturers use.

Epstein says consumers should watch for petroleum-based ingredients and harsh detergents in personal care products because they can damage the skin, making the absorption of toxic ingredients easier. "Any ingredient ending in 'eth,' like sodium laureth and steareth," he says, "carries very powerful irritant detergents."

Aubrey Hampton, founder of Aubrey Organics, cautions against personal care products that are made with urea preservatives, which can cause skin inflammation. He also cautions against hair sprays that contain polyvinylpyrrolidone copolymer (PVP/VA), which can cause lung damage as well as breathing problems.

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it would need to be refrigerated. To avoid parabens, Jason Natural Cosmetics has switched from methylparaben to a natural preservative that has the same shelf life—2–3 years—as the paraben-based preservative. In January 2003, for its Shaman Earthly Organics line, Jason debuted a preservative that consists of sodium benzoate (salt crystals), potassium sorbate (powder from mountain ash trees combined with potassium salt) and grapefruit-seed extract. “Now our preservative systems are food grade, which adds to the purity level of our products,” Light says.

Aubrey Organics solved the preservative puzzle with a mixture of grapefruit-seed extract and vitamins A, C and E, which inhibits microbacterial growth and helps retard the ingredients’ decay. All of the company’s 250 personal care products are made with this natural preservative, says Aubrey product consultant Sandie Coretti, and have shelf lives of 18 months to 3 years—considerably shorter than products made with synthetic preservatives, which can last 5–8 years, Coretti says.

Kiss My Face’s Obsessively Organic line uses a blend of all-natural preservatives, Byckiewicz says. This blend assures that the products have a shelf life of up to 2 years.

As companies seek alternatives to synthetic preservatives, the industry as a whole is moving forward on issues that are just as challenging. What OCA, OTA and virtually everybody else in the industry agrees on is that the higher the level of organic ingredients in a personal care product, the safer it is for the consumer. How quickly they can agree on standards that they can support is another matter. Until then, consumers will have to educate themselves about label claims—and rely on their local retailers for help.

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