



HOW TO READ A SKIN-CARE LABEL

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An A (alpha-hydroxy acid) to Z (zinc oxide) guide to the Latin and lingo of ingredients. Here's what you absolutely need to know before you shop for a cleanser, moisturizer or anti-wrinkle cream.



WHAT'S IN MY FACE CREAM?

We've all become savvy via food shopping by learning how to read nutrition labels. (Twenty-nine grams of sugar in that blueberry yogurt? Back it goes.) But when it comes to skin-care products, labels aren't nearly so straightforward.

For starters, there's the tongue-twisting list of unfamiliar ingredients, like iodopropynyl butylcarbamate and *Melaleuca alternifolia* (a common preservative and tea-tree oil, respectively.) And even if you can identify every ingredient, you still can't ascertain its quality. Nor whether the product has been formulated in a way that allows the active ingredients to penetrate the skin's outermost layer and deliver benefits.

"Cosmetic companies can make all sorts of turn-back-the-clock claims in advertisements," says New York City dermatologist Jody Levine, M.D., "and, for the most part, you can ignore those." Instead, suggests Levine, read the label to see whether there are tested ingredients backing those claims. "If something says it's anti-aging, for example, you'll want to see an antioxidant or some form of retinol."

Until the cosmetics industry starts using the equivalent of those fat, fiber, calorie and protein counts found on food labels, this guide is the next-best thing.



DECODING A BEAUTY LABEL

1. WHATEVER IS FIRST IS THE MOST PLENTIFUL

Ingredients are listed in descending order of concentration, with water typically at the top of the list.

Some labels include the concentration of active ingredients right on the front. *CircuitSkin Cosmeceuticals Savior Problem Skin Cleanser*, for example, clearly states that it contains 2 percent salicylic acid and 5 percent l-lactic acid.

Most often, however, the only way to know if a product contains a hefty dose of an ingredient is by its placement on the ingredients list. "As a general rule of thumb, if you're buying a skin-care product for a particular ingredient, make sure it's in the top third of the ingredient list," says Celeste Hilling, CEO and founder of *Skin Authority*, a high-end skin-care company. Once you get to ingredients that are 1 percent or less of the formulation, those can be listed in any order at all. Preservatives and trace ingredients usually go at the end.

2. FAMILIAR INGREDIENTS MAY HAVE STRANGE NAMES

3. COMPANIES CAN USE PROPRIETARY "MYSTERY" BLENDS

4. NO EXPIRATION DATE IS REQUIRED

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THE PUNCH INSIDE THE PRODUCT:

INGREDIENTS WITH BENEFITS

The art and science of skin care is an ever-changing game, with new categories of ingredients being rolled out constantly. The top dermatologists and skin-care researchers we spoke to agree that the ingredients listed below have been time- (and lab-) tested and shown to yield real benefits.

ANTIOXIDANTS

HYALURONIC ACID

RETINOLS

PEPTIDES

ALPHA-HYDROXY ACIDS

SALICYLIC ACID

KOJIC ACID

NIACINAMIDE

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