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What To Know About Natural Skin Care If You Have Sensitive Skin

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A few things to keep in mind when switching to natural products

I am something of a skin-care obsessive. When you have sensitive, acne-prone, and oily skin all wrapped up in one little package, it's kind of a necessity. I read ingredient labels, I do my best

to figure out what does and doesn't work for my skin, and I only test one new product at a time. My dermatologist is very proud of me.

Also, as an excessive planner, I'm already looking into New Year's resolutions for 2017. You know, so I have time to plan ahead. And to read those labels. One resolution I have bouncing around my brain is transitioning over to a more natural skin-care routine.

You'd think that natural skin care would be the best bet for someone with sensitive skin, right? I'm not so sure it is. The few natural skin-care products I've tried have given me majorly mixed results. Like, there's this natural face mask from Lush that makes my skin super clear and glowing. But also, there was this seaweed and peppermint cold-relieving bath soak that I tried once, and while it opened up my nasal passages just fine, it also covered my entire body in hives.

Because things have been so radically hit or miss, I thought I would chat with a few experts in the business of skin care and natural products, just to get the lowdown on what those of us with sensitive skin should keep in mind when changing our skin-care routine.

Why go natural?

I asked every expert in this article the same question: Do you prefer natural skin care? And every single one gave a resounding "Yes!" But I think Heather Wilson, director of brand development and esthetician for InstaNatural, put it best, saying, "I prefer natural skin-care options because I believe natural ingredients can provide tremendous benefits to the skin without the same concerns that some synthetic ingredients contain. While I do not believe that an ingredient must be natural to be safe, when there is an option of a natural alternative that provides results along with safety, I believe it to be the healthiest route."

Wilson goes on to explain that it's critical to stay on top of new scientific research regarding natural and synthetic skin care because not all synthetic products are bad for you. "Synthetic ingredients can serve a very specific purpose in skin care, and it is important for brands to commit to continually research ingredient discoveries to ensure we are offering the best, safest formulas to our customers," she says. Amen to that.

Get Oily

The first thing I wanted to know was what ingredients in natural skin care are a safe bet. That is, what ingredients the experts knew would usually be non-reactive for those of us with sensitive skin. Again, they all came back with the same answer: oils.

Specifically, cold-pressed oils which retain more benefits than oils extracted by other methods. Emily Cunningham, co-founder of True Moringa, dispels a well-known myth about oils: "A common misconception is that oils are not good for people with acne-prone, sensitive, or oily

skin. In fact, oils like jojoba and moringa mimic the skin's natural sebum very closely." This helps people with acne-prone skin because it can balance out oil production as opposed to drying your skin with harsh synthetic skin care—or even toothpaste for those beauty hackers among us.

But you don't need to use oils just for moisturizing skin says Dr. Debbie Palmer, a board-certified dermatologist, medical director, co-founder of Dermatology Associates of New York, founder of Replere®, and general oil multitasker. "One household/kitchen ingredient that I love is extra virgin olive oil. It is non-comedogenic and won't clog pores, and contains antioxidant vitamins A and E. I recommend using it on a cotton ball for makeup removal," she says. I've tried olive oil as a makeup remover myself and it is super gentle yet effective, which makes it perfect for heavy eye makeup days.

Try a DIY

One of the things a lot of people like about natural skin care is that the ingredients can be found right in your kitchen. Ingredient lists full of words you can actually pronounce will put your mind at ease, so why not just make some natural skin-care products this weekend?

Kirsten Kjaer Weis, founder of Kjaer Weis, says, "Honey, aloe vera, avocado... they are all calming and soothing. Some good DIY face mask recipes can be found online but always do your research and only take advice from trusted sources—especially when it comes to your skin."

Doing that research is seriously important, particularly if you have sensitive skin. Cunningham warns of the possible negatives of a DIY gone wrong. "Often the issue with DIYs is properly preserving the formulations; mold, yeast, and bacteria can be more harmful than chemical preservatives!" She recommends DIYers to make just enough of their concoction for one treatment. That way you know you won't use potentially moldy products on your sensitive skin.

Stay Away from Lemon Juice

One thing you should make sure not to use in your at-home face mask is lemon juice. It can get dicey (and burn you) pretty quickly. Both Wilson and Rachel Winard, founder of Brooklyn, New York-based Soapwalla, recommend avoiding citrus in the form of lemon juice.

Lemons and other citrus fruit, in case you didn't know, are photoreactive. This is why many of us covered sections of our hair in lemon juice in the summer when we were 12 as a way to get quick highlights. It's also why it can burn our skin. Even if you don't get a potential chemical burn from using lemon juice, it can still cause sensitive skin to get red and inflamed. So. Not. Worth. It.

Essential Oils Are Maybe Not So Essential

For me, my biggest obstacle is finding natural products containing essential oils that my skin actually likes. It seems to be so hit or miss as to which essential oils will cause a reaction.

Winard says that besides avoiding essential oils to which you know you have a food allergy (like citrus fruits or nuts), pay close attention to the quality of the essential oil. “Natural ingredients, particularly essential oils, are very potent and I treat them with respect. Less is more when it comes to essential oils. And you want to ensure you’re using products that source responsibly and that use essential oils that are responsibly sourced and distilled.”

So the bargain brand tea tree oil that’s been sitting on the shelf for a year may not be the best choice to splash on your face.

Patch Test Before You Use Anything

I’m no stranger to product reactions. And I’m not going to lie, they are the worst. So much so that it can make you want to only use the same products on repeat, forever. But I also love trying new things, and the best way to safely incorporate new products is to try and be patient and patch test your new skin care.

Winard says, “I recommend testing the product for two to three days on the inside of your wrist and/or behind your ear. If you tend to have sensitive skin, like me, it doesn’t hurt to spot test for a few more days to ensure the new product will play nicely with your finicky skin.” So that means you’ll have to wait a few more days to use a new product. Probably not the worst thing if the alternative is painfully sensitive skin for a week.

What About Natural Deodorant?

Real talk, my armpits are particularly sensitive. I have to use two different deodorants back and forth or my underarms can get dry and itchy. The idea of using a natural deodorant seems like it may be a good fit so I can smell clean with comfortable pits. I asked what to look out for when it comes to natural deodorants. Wilson had a lot of information regarding the pit stuff.

She says, “The most common complaint with natural deodorants is that they don’t leave the skin feeling as dry as the conventional antiperspirant.” Moist pits? No, thanks. But Wilson continues, “To solve this challenge, many formulas have come to include the use of baking soda as a primary ingredient—which sounds great in theory, but can cause intense sensitivity in the skin.”

This is because baking soda is very basic—the pH type of basic. This means that while baking soda can help absorb sweat, it can also dry your skin and lead to painfully red and irritated underarms. Wilson says to look for natural deodorants without baking soda. “Instead, look for natural deodorants with a glycerin base. While these might feel different than your

conventional deodorant, they require less product—one to two swipes per underarm—and won't cause irritation in the skin." Sure sounds worth it to me.

Conclusions

As with everything, the key to finding the right natural skin care for sensitive skin involves educating yourself and gathering as much information—including test runs and experimentation—as possible. Find what works for you and play around with different options. It's beauty and wellness, after all—it should be fun!

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