

CHOOSING PRODUCTS WISELY



“Organic,” “hypoallergenic,” “fragrance-free,” “preservative-free.”

Makers of massage supplies often slather their products with as many green-sounding adjectives as possible in hopes of appealing to socially responsible consumers. But how can a massage therapist—at least one lacking a degree in chemistry—really know which products are worth investing in and which claims are just unfounded hype? More importantly, could some products actually cause harm?

It’s not always easy to know. But following are some things to consider and some steps to take toward becoming the most responsible consumer you can be.

1. LABELS DON’T MEAN A THING Just because something is labeled “hypoallergenic” doesn’t mean it won’t irritate the skin. “Organic” or “preservative-free” products may still contain chemicals. And “fragrance-free” doesn’t mean you can’t smell it.

“There are a lot of ‘organics’ out there,” says Dianna Dapkins, president of Pure Pro, Inc., based in Greenfield, Massachusetts. “The word *organic* has become like the word *natural* in the ’70s. It just gets put on there. But there are no organic standards for topicals or cosmetics. When you see ‘organic’ on a label, it doesn’t mean anything.”

The one exception is a label carrying the “USDA certified organic” logo. Products carrying that specific designation cannot contain a drop of anything synthetic.

Likewise, “fragrance-free” simply means no additional chemical fragrances have been added. It may still have a distinct chemical odor that is merely unmasked without the addition of more pleasant smells.

Best advice? Read the ingredients list and be skeptical of label claims. If a product is marked “organic” but contains synthetic ingredients, how organic can it really be? “Don’t be ‘greenwashed,’” Dapkins says.

2. CHEAPER DOESN'T NECESSARILY EQUATE TO BETTER VALUE

“Price in this industry is almost meaningless,” Dapkins says. “People may buy low-priced items not realizing that they may end up using more—substantially more—of a cheap product because it has more water in it. It doesn’t go as far, it evaporates, and doesn’t have as much skin play.”

Calculate expenses on a per-client basis rather than a per-ounce basis. You may find the difference in cost is not all that dramatic. Using higher-grade products may cost twice as much—but it’s still only pennies per client. Think of the difference as an investment in your hands.

“When you use a low-priced product in the topical realm, most of the time you’re risking a higher incidence of skin irritation because of the lower grade of ingredient,” Dapkins says. “That’s not a risk that’s worth a few pennies per treatment.”

3. AVOID “ALL-PURPOSE” PRODUCTS

New therapists sometimes look for one lotion they can use for all their clients. “That’s like eating cereal—and only cereal—for the rest of your life,” Dapkins says. “It’s not the best thing for your body or your hands. It’s better to vary the products you use,” she says.

“I speak to people nearly daily who have of issues that have resulted from overexposure to one ingredient or another,” says Kyle Rimbey, national sales manager for SacredEarth Botanicals in Eugene, Oregon. “Ingredients can build up slowly in the body, giving them toxicity and causing all kinds of problems, either internal or external.”

Consider this—even the best client will likely get only one massage a week, but a massage therapist’s exposure to massage oils may be 20 times that. So think about your own skin first when purchasing products.

Having a range of different oils and lotions on hand is smart not only for the therapist’s well-being, but for the client’s as well. “I would never dream of using the same product on the feet that you use on the face,” Dapkins says. “You need different viscosities and textures for different body parts. And an elderly client with papery skin will need a different product than an athlete with a lot of body hair.”

4. EDUCATE YOURSELF ABOUT THOSE TONGUE-TWISTING INGREDIENTS

It’s daunting to be confronted with long chemical names. But you need to know what’s in those products. “If it is overwhelming, try learning one new ingredient off your list each week,” Dapkins suggests.

Dapkins is in the process of constructing a website with the lowdown on the products commonly found in different massage products. She hopes to have that up and running by fall. In the meantime, Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.com) is a good place to start. It’s not perfect, but it’s better than relying solely on manufacturers’ marketing materials or on emotional, opinion-laden articles found elsewhere on the Internet.

“Reading through several people’s takes on these ingredients will tend to give you fairly reasonable information,” Rimbey suggests. “There’s a lot of junk on the Internet, and a lot of bully pulpits where people attack one ingredient or another. You can’t trust everything you read, but if an ingredient dictionary cites medical journals or has references, that makes me feel a lot better. Getting information from good, reputable sources is the best you can do.”

5. WHILE YOU’RE ROOTING AROUND IN WIKIPEDIA, LOOK UP ETHOXYLATION

The term describes a chemical process in which ethylene oxide, a petroleum solvent, is added to substances to make them more soluble in water. Unfortunately, the process usually results in the creation of 1,4-Dioxane, a potentially cancer-causing substance.

Last March, the Organic Consumers Association reported that of 100 “natural” and “organic” soaps that it tested, 47 had detectable levels of 1,4-Dioxane. The FDA has no standards on acceptable levels of the substance

If you see the term *ethoxylated* on a product’s ingredient list, be wary.

6. PARABENS: THE DEVIL WE KNOW

There’s no such thing as a 100 percent natural lotion or cream. “We mix water into a solution to give it that wonderful consistency,” Dapkins says. “And water is life. It grows mold. So if you want a lotion or a cream that people will actually want, you have to put some kind of preservatives in it. And preservatives, by their nature, will be chemicals.”

Parabens have been used by the cosmetics and pharmaceutical industries for a long time. “They’re an old preservative; the devil we know,” Dapkins says. They can cause skin irritation in a small number of people.

More worrisome is one controversial study—never replicated—that linked parabens to breast tumors.

Because of concerns about potential toxic side effects of parabens, many manufacturers have stopped using them. But what have they used in their place? Typically they use phenoxyethanol—the devil we don't know.

“It's all about concentration levels,” said Rimbey, whose company does use phenoxyethanol in its products. “We use as little percentage as possible, keeping in mind that [it] needs to have a reasonable shelf life. Most of our research is dedicated to finding an alternative to some of the more common preservatives being used today. But so far, they're still a necessary evil in lotions and creams, and we feel this is one of the safest.”

7. LOOK FOR PRODUCTS WITH THE FEWEST INGREDIENTS, AND INGREDIENTS YOU RECOGNIZE

The fewer ingredients in a product, the fewer potential problems.

Nut-based oils are fine, but make sure you stock some nut-free products. An estimated 1 percent of Americans have some kind of sensitivity to nut-based products, and in extreme cases exposure can lead to death.

“That doesn't mean you have to give up your favorite product, but you do need to have one or two safety products on hand, like apricot kernel oil or grapeseed oil,” Dapkins says. “They're simple, so if someone has a reaction to something, it's easy to determine what, because it's a single ingredient.”

One excellent option is pure jojoba oil, which is a liquid wax ester, not an oil. It comes from a seed, not a nut. And because it won't go rancid, it contains no preservatives.

“There's nothing else like it,” says Bob Butler, president of The Jojoba Company of Waldoboro, Maine. “You often find products with jojoba in

them, but that requires formulations, emulsions, and God knows what. You find therapists developing sensitivity reactions to products like that. It's the formulations that cause the problems. But we don't have anything to formulate. It's just pure extract.”

8. KNOW THAT SOMETIMES, READING THE LABEL JUST ISN'T ENOUGH

“You could look at two different products' lists of ingredients and they'll look identical,” says Jean Shea, founder and CEO of Biotone, based in San Diego. “But are those formulas identical? No. When you're listing ingredients in a formula, you list by weight, with the heaviest items first. When it comes to those that make up 1 percent or less of the formula, they're listed in any order you want to put them. So you simply can't make a comparison.”

Shea's advice is to find a manufacturer you like and stick with that company.

“You can't judge a formula by its ingredients,” she says. “But if you believe in a company and like their products, then you're on the right road.”

9. ASK LOTS OF QUESTIONS, AND IF A COMPANY CAN'T ANSWER THEM, DON'T BUY FROM THAT COMPANY

First question to ask: “What are people using this product for?” Then ask, “Are you finding any kind of skin irritation issues with this product, and if so, what?” Then ask where it's made, how fresh it is, and what its shelf life is. “If a vendor can't tell you, that [is] a red flag,” Dapkins says.

10. LET GREEN THINKING INFUSE YOUR WHOLE PRACTICE, NOT JUST YOUR PRODUCT PURCHASES

Of course you should recycle. And if you offer your client water, serve filtered water in a biodegradable cup, not store-bought water in a plastic bottle bound for the landfill. Put cloth towels in the bathroom rather than paper towels. Use eco-friendly cleaning products.

“Look for things like recycled packaging,” Rimbey says. “And buying in bulk means reduced packaging and reduced people and machine efforts to fill those bottles.

Try to buy locally produced products whenever possible, and look for certified organic ingredients.

They're all small steps. But in doing so, every massage therapist can help heal the world, one client at a time. **m&b**

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