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Partnerships and
Your Path to Success



voices



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CONTROVERSIAL? UNCONVENTIONAL? WISDOM TO SHARE?

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PRESERVATIVES

Myths & Truths



Choosing products for your spa business can be an overwhelming and confusing process. The marketing tactics used by some skin care companies add to the confusion and make it hard for you, as a spa professional, to find a quality product that fits your business and your clients' needs.

Today, more and more spa professionals and clients are looking for products that contain natural ingredients and avoid commonly used cosmetic chemicals. This growing demand has led to a number of misconceptions about what makes a product natural. One such misconception focuses on the use of preservatives in cosmetic formulations. As Danné Montague-King, journalist, lecturer and founder of his eponymous skin care line, has pointed out, it is possible to create a truly natural product. The catch is, it must be kept in the refrigerator and used in two weeks.

Here are some facts that can help you in your quest to gain a clearer understanding of what makes a safe product as it relates to preservative use.

Why Preservatives?

It may sound like a no-brainer, but it's worth a reminder: It is much safer to have a skin care product that contains a small amount of preservatives than one with a large amount of bacteria or mold! Skin care companies have a number of options when it comes to preservatives, and which one they choose often has to do with the spectrum of stability required for their particular formula.

A range of bacteria, molds and yeasts can grow in cosmetic formulas as well as in the individual raw ingredients. The more natural the product, the higher the chances that the ingredients and finished formula can contain high levels of microbials. Generally, a product needs to be under an acceptable range for each different type of microbial to be considered suitable for application to the skin. This is accomplished by using clean and stabilized raw ingredients, clean manufacturing procedures and also taking steps to stabilize the finished formula. The manufacturer also needs to continually conduct microbial testing and preservative challenge testing to ensure products are safe. Ask your suppliers about their procedures. Also check the standards in your area, such as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Good Manufacturing Practice standards, and make sure your suppliers follow them.

Although you might hear claims to the contrary, food-grade preservatives are generally not enough on their own to provide an adequate stability of shelf life to most cosmetic formulas. Despite this, there are skin care companies that claim that their products do not require a preservative, or that the products are preserved with only 100 percent natural or food-grade preservatives. If you hear this claim, consider it a red flag. If a supplier of a skin care line tells you its products are "preservative free" or even "paraben free," be sure to ask what alternative it is using to ensure that the product is safe and stable.

What to Look For

Speaking of parabens, these preservatives have received a bad rap in recent years, which has not been properly justified scientifically. In fact, new studies have shown parabens to be a safe option, and also suggest that they do not accumulate internally as some have initially thought. A pairing of methyl/propyl paraben in a small percentage (.5 to .6 percent) in conjunction with a food-grade preservative or a natural stabilizer such as Biovert Enzyme, can provide a safe formula that is free of harmful levels of microbials.

Still want to avoid parabens while stocking safe products? There are plenty of options. Many cosmetics companies that want to avoid parabens altogether have turned to OptiPhen as a good alternative.

Whichever side of the paraben debate you fall on, it's best to avoid preservatives that contain formaldehyde, propylene glycol and alcohol, as these can cause skin irritations even when used in low concentrations.

The main point to note is that in many cases, it's not the type of preservative used – it's the concentration. A high percentage of preservatives is not needed to produce a product with adequate shelf life and stability. Overusing preservatives can also cause skin irritations.

As a spa professional, it is important to ensure that your clients are kept safe. Rather than just focusing on whether a product is "natural," "organic" or "preservative free," do your research, ask questions of your suppliers and don't get swayed by marketing hype. You'll find the perfect product line to suit your – and your clients' – needs. ■

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