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For: My Patients
From: Dr. Jacobs
Re: How To Choose the Right Face Lotion?

Everyday you see your face in your bathroom mirror. “Face” the fact: Certain people are blessed from birth with “perfect” facial skin. All they have to do is get up in the morning, wash their face, and drive to their modeling job. At the end of the day we will see their face on the covers of magazines, lined up at the check out stand at the grocery store. But for most people, it really isn’t so easy. I know because I work with complexion problem patients each day. The only one I know with “perfect” maintenance free skin is Snow White, and she works at Disneyland.

“Perfect” facial skin is really all about finding that unique program for you and only you. Though it can involve various medications and procedures for any underlying medical problem, adequate facial moisturization is a must for everyone, even people with “healthy” skin. Certain lucky people do not need to use a facial moisturizer. Certain people are blessed with skin that is well moisturized and balanced by their own natural facial lipids and oils. Others must use a facial moisturizer and there are hundreds to choose from. If your skin care program calls for a facial moisturizer, then you should understand the ABC’s of facial moisturizers so you can make the best personal choice.

When shopping for a facial moisturizer, there are three important factors you should consider: First is comedogenicity, which is the ability or potential for the product to block or clog your pores. Second is allergenicity, which is the ability or potential for the product to irritate your skin. Third is nutritivity, which is the ability or potential for the product to adequately nourish your skin. When shopping at the department store, you should ask questions about these three basic qualities.

Is the lotion comedogenic? In other words, ask, “Will it block my pores?” This is an important question, especially if you are prone to acne, blackheads, or pimples. Certain types of moisturizing ingredients can physically enter your pores and can block them so that your natural oils cannot escape. Thus, your oils remain trapped inside and will eventually form blackheads, whiteheads, and pimples. The cosmetic sales person may say, “Yes, the label says, ‘Noncomedogenic.’” But is it actually noncomedogenic? Unfortunately, the FDA does not really regulate claims of comedogenicity. If the lotion does not cause pore blockage in rabbit ears, then the company will say that it is noncomedogenic. But in actuality, in humans, it may still block pores. Thus, beware. If your pores are easily blocked, you should avoid facial moisturizers containing any type of mineral oil, petrolatum, paraffin, vitamin E, or any ingredient with the word “oil” in it. It is easier and less expensive to manufacture a luscious facial moisturizer using any of the above ingredients. It is more difficult to make a luscious, truly noncomedogenic facial moisturizer. That is why the truly noncomedogenic facial moisturizers are more costly.

Is the lotion allergenic? In other words, ask, “Will the lotion irritate my face?” This is an important question, especially if you dry and sensitive skin. Certain people are very sensitive and are easily irritated. Like the story of the Princess and the Pea, these people can feel a pea beneath 20 mattresses. If this is your face, then, beware. Certain facial moisturizers contain potentially irritating or allergenic ingredients such as propylene glycol, vitamin E, sunscreens, alpha hydroxy acids, salicylic acids, retinol, aloe, fragrance, benzyl alcohol, and preservatives such as parabens and phenoxyethanol. These irritating ingredients are so common, that certain facial moisturizers actually contain topical anesthetic agents to “numb” your skin so that the ingredients do not burn or sting your face. The cosmetic sales person may say, “Yes, the label says, ‘Hypoallergenic.’” But is it actually hypoallergenic? Unfortunately, the FDA does not really regulate claims of hypoallergenicity. Thus, when shopping for a facial moisturizer, you may consider products that are fragrance free, preservative free, propylene glycol free and truly hypoallergenic.

Is the lotion nutritive? In other words, ask, “Will the lotion add nutrition to my skin?” This is an important question, especially if you are prone to eczema, or if you are using acne or anti-wrinkle medications on your face, or, if you have sun damaged skin. Most people do not realize that their skin requires certain topical nutrients that may not be replenished by the foods they eat. Yes, in order to function normally, your skin barrier requires adequate nourishment, but many people are unaware that they even have a skin barrier. The human skin barrier is a specific structure in your skin that prevents the entrance of unwanted allergens, toxins, and irritants, and prevents the exit of vital fluids such as water. Thus, if your skin barrier is poorly nourished, your skin will lose moisture and become dehydrated. Allergens, toxins, and irritants will more easily enter. Your skin will become dry, inflamed, and itchy. Soap and dry air will strip the skin of lipids and are your skin barrier’s biggest enemies. Thus, your skin barrier requires nourishment with cholesterol, ceramides, and free fatty acids. The difference between a skin moisturizer with lipids and a moisturizer without lipids is like the difference between a glass of lactose free vitamin D milk and a glass of diet rootbeer. Just as your body needs nutrients, your skin also needs true nutrition. Lipids are nutrients for your skin; and, the best facial moisturizers contain nourishing lipids.

Certain people will drink a Coke and eat a big bag of Cheetos and say, “I’ve had my nutrition.” But, did they really? Of course not. They have just consumed what nutritionists call “empty calories.” With the same logic, some people smear Intense Brand Lotion with aloe all over their skin and announce, “I have just moisturized!” But have they really applied nourishment to their skin? The answer is, “No.” Aloe can feel good but is not a lipid. Mineral oil and petrolatum are helpful, but do not replenish the lipids. Their skin care is a program of empty calories. Some may ask, “Is there a pill or food that will replenish my lipids?” Unfortunately, cholesterol is bad for your heart, but it is good for your skin. So, you should not eat cholesterol, but rather, you should use it in a topical form. Ceramides are abundant in animal brains, but few people eat cow brains; thus, ceramides should also be added in topical form. Free fatty acids can be added by foods rich in fish oil. Thus, there is really no good dietary source for all three lipids. When it comes to facial moisturizers, the best ones contain physiological type lipids that replenish and restore the skin’s natural barrier qualities. Inferior moisturizers do not contain lipids.

The next time you study your face in your bathroom mirror, think about moisturization. If you do need a facial moisturizer, think about the three qualities before making your decision: Comedogenicity, Allergenicity, and Nutritivity.