Are natural and organic products safer or better?

A. In a word, no. Plenty of natural ingredients are irritants and allergens: “Tea tree oil and lavender are two big ones,” says dermatologist Emmy Graber, M.D., of Boston University School of Medicine. While these types of products are less likely to contain irritating parabens, many still have added fragrance, which can also cause reactions. So read ingredient labels carefully.

Is Your Skin Sensitive?

Blame dry winter weather for skin flare-ups. Here’s how to get relief for redness and itching—fast

BY MELANIE RUD CHADWICK
Q: I get red, itchy bumps around my eyes—and I don't even use eye cream! How can that be?

A: Eyes are the number one place for women to develop skin allergies, which usually aren't caused by eye cream, says dermatologist Mona Gohara, M.D., of the Yale School of Medicine. Think of all the things you touch during the day: "People get allergens on their fingers—nail polish and gold and nickel in jewelry are common culprits—and then rub their eyes," says Dr. Graber. "You may not have a reaction on the thick skin on your hands but may develop one in the delicate eye area." The fix is simple: Avoid touching your face.

Q: Why can I use a cream for years with no problems and then one day, wham, it's a nightmare?

A: "You can develop an allergy at any time because, just like your other organs, your skin changes as you age. This can suddenly sensitize your immune system to something it used to be able to tolerate," says Dr. Gohara. "I see it all the time in middle-aged women, especially those who use a lot of products." The fewer ingredients you put on your skin, the less likely you are to have a reaction. Another possibility: Even though, say, a lotion retains the same name and packaging, a tweak in its formula or a new ingredient may be to blame. If you develop a problem, check with the manufacturer about any changes in formulation. The easiest move is to stop using that item.

Q: What ingredients should I look for...and which ones should I skip?

A: First and foremost, avoid fragrance, a frequent cause of allergies, as well as anything labeled "antibacterial" (which may contain drying ingredients such as alcohol and triclosan). Choose products rich in moisturizers to help keep your skin balanced; dimethicone, glycerin, and petrolatum are all good options that are generally well tolerated. And while there are no industry standards for products labeled "hypoallergenic" or "for sensitive skin," using these cosmetics is a good place to start if your skin is very reactive; we like VMV Hyopallergenics (vmv hypoallergenics.com), an allergy-tested skin-care and makeup line.

### EIGHT COMMON CULPRITS

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- Fragrance: One of the most common cosmetic allergens
- Nickel: Found in costume jewelry and some cell phones
- Neomycin: Active ingredient in OTC antibacterial ointments
- Balsam of Peru: Often used in fragrances
- Thimerosal: Preservative in some contact lens and nasal solutions
- Gold: In jewelry (all karats)
- Formaldehyde: Preservative found in clothing and beauty products
- Quaternium-15: A cosmetic preservative
LOOK GOOD

**Q**

"My skin reacts to everything! How can I control it?"

**A.** Here's some good news: "The healthier your skin is, the less reactive it'll be," Dr. Graber says. To keep skin in peak condition, swap out soap, which can strip skin of its natural oils, for a non-soap cleanser, like Yes to Carrots Fragrance Free Daily Cream Facial Cleanser ($8, Target). Use a moisturizer with ceramides to help strengthen the top layer of your skin; a good bet is CeraVe Facial Moisturizing Lotion PM ($13, drugstores). If all else fails, cutting back on the number of products you use can also help keep symptoms under control.

**Q.** How can I tell if a product will cause problems?

**A.** Symptoms like redness, itching, bumps, or flaking can flare up immediately after you try a new beauty product—or can take days to appear. The time lag can make it difficult to suss out the culprit. So if you're prone to reactions, do what derms call a "use test": Apply a bit of the product on your inner arm, cover with a bandage, and then keep the area dry for 72 hours. If your skin is still smooth and intact, you have the green light to try the cosmetic as directed. If your skin reacts, that's obviously a red light: You have either an irritation or an allergy. Only a patch test from a skin doc can determine if it's an allergy, but the takeaway is the same: Don't use the offender.

**Q.** Will my skin get more sensitive as I get older?

**A.** Probably. "Age and hormonal changes make your skin drier and thinner and thus more susceptible to reactions," says Dr. Graber. And while some conditions, like eczema, can begin early in life, others, like rosacea, typically appear in people in their 40s. If you're noticing increased sensitivity, check the anti-agers you're using; some common ingredients, like retinol, are known irritants. For a gentler option, stick to peptide-based products. Try Olay Regenerist Fragrance-Free Micro-Sculpting Cream ($25, drugstores).

**Q.** How do I quell an itch?

**A.** If the itching is accompanied by flaking and tightness and your skin isn't pink or red, it's likely just dryness. Apply a petrolatum-based moisturizer or ointment like Aveeno Skin Relief Healing Ointment ($10, drugstores), daily. Another option: an anti-itch cream like Sarna Anti-Itch Lotion ($11.50, drugstores), which contains menthol to trick nerves into feeling a cooling sensation that detracts from the itching. If you also have hives, try an oral antihistamine; if it's accompanied by a rash, opt for an OTC cortisone cream. But if you itch all over, see a doc; it can be a sign of something more serious, like thyroid disease, says Dr. Gohara.