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Experts: Take Anti-aging Skin Care Claims with Grain of Salt

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COLLEGE STATION – The labels are laced with words only a chemist can understand. The commercials often feature women who don't look much older than 35.

No wonder consumers are confused about over-the-counter products touted to fight aging, said experts from Texas Cooperative Extension. But not to worry ... Dr. Carol Rice, Extension health specialist, and Janet Pollard, Extension associate for health, offer these tips to help clear up the confusion.

For one thing, Rice said, don't believe every commercial claim.

"The evidence for the use of over-the-counter cosmetic products that claim anti-aging effects is not yet clearly substantiated," she said.

The place to start clearing the confusion, she said, is the doctor's office.

"Because of the contradicting information and the often unsubstantiated claims by the cosmetic industry, it is important to be a wise consumer," Rice said. "See your doctor or dermatologist if at all possible. They can often help you assess your skin type and give advice about skin products based on credible research and years of experience."

After that, the first 'true' anti-aging item on your shopping list should be sunscreen, Rice said, because exposure to the sun is the No. 1 preventable cause of skin damage.

This kind of skin damage, called photo-aging, includes premature wrinkling, damage to natural pigmentation and loss of quality in the skin. It can also lead to skin cancer, she said.

"Sunscreen qualifies as both a cosmetic and a drug and is regulated by the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) as such," Rice said.

"Sunscreen should be your first tool in your defense against skin damage and aging skin. You should use sunscreen on a daily basis, either as part of a cosmetic or on the skin underneath other cosmetic products, unless advised otherwise by your doctor."

She recommends waterproof sunscreen and lip balm, both with at least 15 SPF.

Ordinary skin creams and lotions aren't designed to reduce the damage caused by the sun, Pollard said. That requires stronger medicine.

Retinoids are the only products approved by the FDA as safe and effective in reducing signs of photo-aging, she said. Retinoids are defined as natural or synthetic derivatives of vitamin A.

(<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/retinoid>)

"These products are only available by prescription. Over-the-counter products containing retinol or retinal have not been proven effective."

Antioxidants may help slow down aging in the skin, but not usually when administered through skin creams, Rice said. The best way to get antioxidants is through diet.

"As natural components in the body and when consumed in food sources, antioxidants have been shown to act as scavengers of free radicals – unstable oxygen molecules that contribute to accelerated aging of the skin," she said. "Vitamins A, C and E are all antioxidants. It is recommended that we consume these vitamins through food sources, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, some oils, nuts, dairy products and meats.

"Topical antioxidants, other than retinoids, however, are yet to be substantiated as a benefit to the skin."

Some ingredients may be useful in skin creams, Pollard said, but the research isn't yet complete.

"Both Vitamin E and C show promise as protectants against ultra-violet radiation damage from the sun; however, there have not been enough studies on human subjects to substantiate claims for topical use," she said.

"Hydroxy acids show promise in helping reduce fine lines and improving skin tone and color," Pollard said. "There are, however, concerns about side effects."

Her advice: "You should always choose products with ingredients that are FDA-approved for safety. As with any topical cosmetic or drug,

always follow directions as listed on the package and heed any warnings about its usage."

Rice agreed.

"When you go to the cosmetic aisle, be wary of products that make claims to reverse aging skin, especially those that claim to do it fast," she said. "Always consider the safety of the product first. Check for warning labels and safety precautions."

For more information on this and other health-related issues, visit Extension's Family and Consumer Sciences Web site at <http://fcs.tamu.edu/> and click on the link to Health.

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