

A Glutton for Gluten: Should Skin Care Be Gluten-Free?

by Dr. Diana Howard

What's behind the growing phenomenon of gluten-free foods, and moreover, should it start crossing over into the world of skin care?

Gluten is the protein found in wheat, rye and barley flours that reacts when mixed with water. Celiac disease is an auto-immune disorder in which eating gluten causes the lining of the body's small intestine to become inflamed. And, an emerging dietary trend is to eat cookies, cereals, pastas and even pizza dough that are gluten-free, as many people blame gluten for causing gas, abdominal pain and bloating.

As of 2009, only 1% of the world's population has Celiac disease. What's important to note is these are symptoms of eating gluten, not applying it to the skin!

On skin care ingredient labels, primary sources of gluten are listed as Hydrolyzed Wheat Protein, Triticum Vulgare (Wheat Germ) Oil or Extract and Sodium Lauroyl Oat Amino Acids. The U.S. FDA and WHO Codex Alimentarius have set preliminary thresholds of less than 20 ppm of gluten for a gluten-free claim. (This is more due to "analytical limitations" than anything else.)

Unfortunately, suppliers of raw materials don't always certify the concentration of gluten in the raw materials that they provide skin care companies. And since the raw materials are not standardized with each batch (meaning they adjust each batch to contain a constant amount of gluten) the gluten content could fluctuate.

While many self-proclaimed experts claim any skin care product with gluten will penetrate through the skin's barrier and trigger the disease, the Celiac Society disagrees. "Gluten molecules are too large to be absorbed through the skin. If you're having a reaction to a personal care product (for example, a moisturizer or sunscreen lotion) that contains gluten, you may be allergic to one or more of the other ingredients."

While it seems the whole world has got it in for gluten, The International Dermal Institute agrees with the Celiac Society and the many scientists that contend topical application is not an issue. Unless a product is used on the lips or in the mouth (think lip conditioners, lipstick, toothpaste or mouthwash), there is no need for concern. However, it is always up to the client and skin care professional to make the best possible choice for skin health.