

News

There's No Aloe Vera in Many Aloe Vera Products at Major Stores



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Photo: Stocksy

When you buy an aloe vera product, it's understandable that you'd expect it to contain actual aloe vera — especially if it says so on the ingredients list. But new lab testing done by a watchdog group found that's just not the case when it comes to some popular store-brand aloe gels.

New York-based ConsumerLab.com, which tested several aloe products, including aloe vera gels, discovered that store-brand aloe gels at Wal-Mart, Target, and CVS showed no evidence that actual aloe was in the products. However, each product listed “aloe barbadensis leaf juice” (aka aloe vera) as either the first or second ingredient after water, Bloomberg News reports.

Aloe vera is considered a cosmetic in the U.S., which means these products aren't approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) before they hit shelves. However, the FDA does reserve the right to pull products if they contain false advertising.

Bloomberg News hired a lab to test the products and found that aloe's three chemical markers — acemannan, malic acid, and glucose — weren't present in tests for Wal-Mart, Target, and CVS aloe vera gels. However, all three contained maltodextrin, a sugar that is sometimes used to mimic aloe.

An aloe vera gel sold at Walgreens contained malic acid, but not glucose or acemannan, which means it may or may not actually contain some aloe, Bloomberg says. The four gels that Bloomberg analyzed were Wal-Mart's Equate Aloe After Sun Gel with pure aloe vera, Target's Up & Up Aloe Vera Gel with pure aloe vera, CVS Aftersun Aloe Vera Moisturizing Gel, and Walgreens Alcohol Free Aloe Vera Body Gel.

The news is infuriating and laughable (on some level), but will using an aloe vera gel that doesn't contain aloe vera do anything for you?

First, some information on aloe vera. Pure aloe vera has several beneficial properties for skin, Gary Goldenberg, M.D., medical director of the Dermatology Faculty Practice at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, tells Yahoo Beauty. It's anti-inflammatory, making it valuable for treating everything from a sunburn to acne, and has antioxidant properties that can help normalize the skin cells after they've been exposed to UV rays, therefore helping to stave off wrinkles. “It has moisturizing properties as well,” he says.

So what about the imitation ingredients? “While I don’t think these products can cause harm, they will not have the same properties as real aloe and therefore may not give you the same results,” Goldenberg says. However, he notes, malic acid (which is also found in wine) has been used in skin care products as a brightener and moisturizer.

Joshua Zeichner, M.D., a New York City-based board-certified dermatologist, tells Yahoo Beauty that maltodextrin has skin-soothing properties that may have similar benefits to some of the sugars found naturally in aloe. And, he adds, at high levels malic acid can cause exfoliation of the outer skin layers.

While dermatologist Cynthia Bailey, M.D., a diplomat of the American Board of Dermatology and president and CEO of Advanced Skin Care and Dermatology Inc., tells Yahoo Beauty that it’s not uncommon for companies to use minute amounts of a touted ingredient in a product, she calls it “shocking” that there would be no aloe vera at all.

Despite the potential benefits of using fake aloe, Goldenberg makes an important point: “If a product says it contains aloe, it should contain aloe.”

Bailey urges people to be wary of which aloe vera products they purchase, since some can contain “potent allergens that will create lifelong allergies to many related and common ingredients, such as PABA sunscreens, sulfa drugs, thiazide diuretics, and permanent hair dye.”

To make sure the aloe products you buy do, in fact, contain aloe, Zeichner recommends choosing ones from a trusted brand with a long history of making quality products. “While ingredients listed on the back of the bottles may look identical, the quality of the ingredients and the way they are formulated may be very different between a brand name and a generic skin care product,” he says. “You may be paying more for the brand name, but in some cases it may be worth it.”

Randy Hargrove, director of national media relations for Wal-Mart, tells Yahoo Beauty that the company “holds our suppliers to high standards, and [we] are committed to providing our customers the quality products they expect. We contacted our supplier, and they stand behind the authenticity of their products.” Target publicist Erica Winkels tells Yahoo Beauty that the company can’t comment due to pending litigation. A representative for CVS did not respond to Yahoo Beauty’s request for comment.