

The Scary Truth About Your Fragrance-Free And Hypoallergenic Moisturizers

This is a must-read if you've got sensitive skin.

BY KORIN MILLER October 2, 2017



It's understandable that you'd assume that a moisturizer that says it's fragrance-free and hypoallergenic would actually live up to its claims. But unfortunately, a new study found that plenty of products that use these labels are straight-up lying about it.

That's the takeaway from a new investigation published in *JAMA Dermatology*. For the study, researchers analyzed the ingredients of 174 best-selling moisturizers, lotions, and creams sold by Amazon, Target, and Walmart. They discovered that 45 percent of the products that claimed they were "fragrance free" actually had some kind of fragrance.

It was even worse for those that claimed to be hypoallergenic, meaning they're unlikely to cause an allergic reaction—83 percent had some type of potentially allergenic chemical. The three most common allergens found were a fragrance mix, paraben mix, and tocopherol, an inexpensive antioxidant that can cause an allergic reaction in some people.

Only 12 percent of the best-selling moisturizers that claimed to be fragrance-free and hypoallergenic actually were. "Given the lack of readily available comparison data on moisturizer efficacy, dermatologists should balance consumer preference, price, and allergenicity in their recommendations," the authors concluded in the study.

“This is very concerning,” says Gary Goldenberg, M.D., assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City. “Many patients may be allergic or skin-sensitive when it comes to fragrance and other potential irritants. One should be able to trust that if a product says it's hypoallergenic that it won't irritate the skin.” People with dermatitis, eczema, psoriasis, acne, or rosacea who have sensitive skin and use a product with allergens may see their skin problems get worse with these products, Goldenberg says.

And fragrance is one of the biggest issues. “Fragrances are a common cause of skin reactions,” Joshua Zeichner, M.D., a New York City-based board-certified dermatologist.. “In some cases, they may cause allergies, and in others, direct irritation to the skin.”

While the term “fragrance-free” should mean there are no fragrances in a product, in some cases it may be used to mean that synthetic fragrances are not used and natural ingredients that offer a fragrance are, Zeichner says. That said, "natural" doesn't mean it's okay for your skin. Poison ivy is natural, he points out, but it still can cause a skin reaction.

While you can keep an eye out for a “fragrance-free” label, it's pretty clear that might not mean jack. Instead, Zeichner recommends looking for the seal of the National Eczema Association. “If the product has the seal, it means it has been evaluated and deemed appropriate for sensitive-skinned individuals and those with eczema,” he explains. Goldenberg also recommends talking to your dermatologist, who should be able to steer you toward the right products.