



## Understanding 'All Natural'

In relation to skin care products, there are no standards for what "natural" actually means. A company can wave a sprig of lavender over a jar of cream and then call it "natural". What it really means to you will depend on your own values.

Typically a "natural" ingredient is defined as having its origins in nature, thus everything of animal, vegetable or mineral origin could be said to be natural - including things like lanolin, beeswax, placenta, emu oil, shark squalene, mineral oil, and petroleum derivatives.

A popular marketing blurb is "derived from plants", but many plant-derived ingredients bear no resemblance to their origins. Sodium lauryl sulphate is often derived from coconut, but this is one of the very ingredients that receive a great deal of negative hype.

### Preservatives

It is important to be aware that even the most "natural" of products require preservatives in order to stay free from bacteria and impurities. Generally these preservatives are at food-grade and at low concentrations. It is possible to have preservative-free products only when they have no water content (e.g. oils and wax-based balms) and therefore cannot support the growth of mold or bacteria.

### Synthetics

"Chemical" and "synthetic" are two more words are often used with negative connotations - when in reality, they just mean substances that are not found naturally. A "synthetic" ingredient still has come from a "natural" source originally; it has just been modified by humans so that its chemical structure is now different.

"Synthetic" ingredients are often used in preparations to transport the active ingredients deeper into the dermal layer of the skin to maximize results. They are also often necessary to stabilize and combine plant-derived ingredients and to make the formulas pleasant to use.

### Irritants

Many people have the impression that a "natural" product will not irritate sensitive skin. But is a plant-derived ingredient really better than an ingredient of any other origin? We often perceive plant derivatives as being "gentler" or "safer", but we forget that poison ivy isn't exactly skin friendly!

The reality is that reactions and irritations can also come from plant extracts, even when they are in their unrefined state. We need only look at how common particular food allergies are to see that our bodies can potentially find the most "natural" of ingredients to be problematic. Common allergies and intolerances include lactose, gluten, nuts, wheat, pollen and so forth - all of which could be considered to be "natural".

Even essential oils - which come directly from plants - are so strong that they have to be diluted before being applied to skin and some can even make us photosensitive (sensitive to the sun). Certainly some consumers will find alcohol-based "synthetic" fragrances irritating to their particular skin, however there are just as many that can not tolerate particular essential oils or botanical extracts.

### Misconceptions

With many ingredients being listed under their scientific name (for example, Vitamin E is usually listed as tocopherol or tocopheryl acetate) it would be easy to be confused as to the origin of these ingredients.

"Ascorbic acid" sounds scary - but it's only vitamin C! Similarly, retinol is a chemical-sounding name for what is actually a form of Vitamin A.

### Bottom Line

You need to make the choice that's best for you, your business and your clients. You need to take into account costs and results you want to achieve.

If you are looking for products that are preservative-free, be aware that you will have to either: a) compromise on shelf life and refrigerate the products; b) purchase single-use ampoules; c) use products that are oil or wax based with no water content.

Be conscious that the potency and color of plant ingredients changes depending on the soil, weather and environmental factors - the less refined the ingredients are, the more likely you are to experience variation from batch to batch.

Be aware that companies might use words like "natural" or "herbal" as part of their company or product name, but it does not necessarily mean that all the ingredients are plant-derived - it's simply a name.