

That cream won't make you look younger - and you know it

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OTTAWA -- When an over-the-counter skin cream promises to reduce the appearance of fine facial lines and wrinkles, Canadian women may buy the product - but they don't buy the hype.

A series of focus groups conducted by the Strategic Counsel for Health Canada has found wide-ranging skepticism about cosmetic claims that, perhaps not surprisingly, increases as women grow older.

Depressing though it may be, there is no fountain of youth - and we know it.

"In general, participants' expectations of the products were quite low," says the Strategic Counsel's report, released in March. "For older women in particular, their expectations were lower, and in their minds more realistic than the expectations set by the product's claims or advertisements."

Not that we don't wish that a jar of cream could make us look 10 years younger. "There is a latent desire or hope that the product will work as desired," says the report. But pessimism abounds.

The researchers based their findings on the attitudes expressed during eight focus groups organized last November in Toronto, Halifax, Montreal and Vancouver. Half of the groups were made up of women between the ages of 16 and 24. The other half consisted of women over 30.

Health Canada, which commissioned the study, is responsible for ensuring the safety of cosmetics used in Canada.

Women who have not yet had to deal with sagging jaw lines or permanent bags below their eyes are more willing to be convinced that the goop they apply to their faces will protect them against what many older women accept as inevitable.

"Younger participants generally held out higher expectations of their products and expressed higher optimism/hope that their products would work as advertised," the report says.

But over all there was a feeling of incredulity expressed about the claims of the skin-care merchants.

Peter Vignjevic, a dermatologist who practises in Hamilton, Ont., and teaches at McMaster University, says the only chemical proven to reduce the effects of aging on skin is vitamin A acid.

It doesn't help with deep wrinkles - nothing will - said Dr. Vignjevic. But it has been clearly documented to reduce freckling, fine lines, early skin changes and mottling and improve

overall skin tone.

Vitamin A acid is available only by prescription, but most doctors have no problem with prescribing it, said Dr. Vignjevic. "You can't hurt yourself with the vitamin A unless you were eating it."

One the plus side, it is relatively cheap at \$20 a tube and is covered by prescription drug plans - though government plans won't cover it after a patient is 65.

The second best products to counter aging are skin creams that contain vitamin C, said Dr. Vignjevic. But they tend to be less stable, which means they can break down and become useless. And they are more expensive.

As for the over-the-counter products, he said, many contain vitamin-A-like compounds such as retinol, but they are not the same as vitamin A. "The prescription stuff is far superior to everything else."

When asked what advice he would give to women looking for a skin cream, Dr. Jignjevic said to stay away from anything that sounds too good to be true.

The label may say facelift in a jar. But "if that was the case, why would anyone be doing facelifts? The cream is going to strip 30 years away? Not going to happen."

Still, the makers of over-the-counter skin creams say their products do work.

Darren Praznik, president of the Canadian Cosmetic Toiletry and Fragrance Association, says products work differently on different people.

"Claims in this particular area around personal-care products are quite regulated by government and advertising standards Canada. You can't just go and put something out there and make a claim ... without it coming under some form of regulation," said Mr. Praznik.

They key for consumers, he said, is to understand the difference between a cosmetic and a drug. This is an area in which the members of the focus groups exhibited much confusion.

If the makers of a skin cream make a therapeutic claim - if they say it will reverse the effects of aging, or eliminate wrinkles, or do anything to change the basic physiology of the body - that product will be governed by drug regulations and the claim must be proven, said Mr. Praznik. Those products carry a Drug Identification Number.

"Cosmetic claims are different because cosmetics are not about altering the physiology of the body. Cosmetics by their nature are about covering up, masking, enhancing."

A cosmetic claim could be that the product "reduces the effects of wrinkles" as opposed to the therapeutic claim that the product "reduces wrinkles," he said.

Which is all well and good. Except that your local drug store is bound to have shelf after shelf of skin creams with nary a DIN in sight.

Neutrogena Healthy Skin Anti-Wrinkle Cream, which costs about \$24, has one. But its package promises only that it "visibly reduces the appearance of fine lines," which sounds

like a cosmetic claim.

NeoStrata HQ also has a DIN and sells for about \$30. It "enhances skin appearance, reduces fine lines."

Most products, however, have no number - even those that retail for \$200 and up such as Elizabeth Arden's Prevage collection, which "helps ease the look of lines to give skin a smoother, more lifted look."

In the end, the Strategic Counsel researchers said clearer labelling to differentiate between cosmetic and pharmaceutical products might be all that is needed to protect consumers. And any initiatives should be targeted at younger consumers first.

Because more mature women, says the study, already possess a "healthy degree of skepticism."