



[OCA
Homepage](#)

How Organic is Organic Soap?

>From The Green Guide Institute
Wednesday, November 05, 2003

A reader asks www.thegreenguide.com:

I would like to know about the issue that the Organic Consumers Association has brought up about petroleum byproducts in organic soap and health care products. Is this really true?

They are saying that many organic health care product companies are using synthetic surfactants derived from petroleum such as olefin sulfonate, cocamidopropyl betaine, sodium myreth sulfate, and paraben preservatives.

What do you know about this? I am trying to figure out what products to purchase now.

The Green Guide Responds:

The short answer to your question is yes, some personal care products that claim to be organic do contain petrochemical surfactants (wetting agents that help products spread) like sodium myreth sulfate and preservatives such as the parabens. However, similar chemical compounds are now being derived plants. Of the ingredients you mention, olefin sulfonate can be derived from petroleum or coconut oil and Cocamidopropyl betaine is derived from coconut using petrochemicals.

The Organic Debate

The USDA has yet to adopt a set of standards and practices for organic personal care products. Consequently, the market is full of confusing product labels, because companies regularly label products containing synthetic compounds "natural" and "organic." And since some of the more common chemicals can now be derived from plants, this is made a selling point. Alternatives such as cocamidopropyl betaine and oleyl betaine may be derived from coconut and palm oils, but require isolating carbon

molecules in the same way many petroleum-based detergents do. And, if that weren't enough, some "organic" personal care products even include petroleum-derived compounds. Two popular "organic" products illustrate the problem. Avalon Organic Botanicals and Nature's Gate Organic Herbal Biotin Shampoo both use highly refined plant-derived compounds like cocamidopropyl betaine and olefin sulfonate, and each uses at least two petroleum-based preservatives: methylparaben and propylparaben.

To settle these issues, the Personal Care Task Force (PCTF) has been formed by the Organic Trade Association (OTA) to develop a set of standards and practices for review by the National Organic Program (NOP)--a branch of the USDA. As noted by watchdog groups like the Organic Consumers Association (OCA) (www.organicconsumers.org) and Oregon Tilth (www.tilth.org), the effort has become politicized around the question, "How organic is organic?" Currently, the field is divided between those who argue Federal organic standards for personal care products should be weaker than those for food and others who believe organic should have the same meaning for both industries. You can see this difference sharply by looking at two different ingredients lists:

* Avalon Organic Botanicals: Lavender Therapeutic Hair Shampoo
Certified organic lavender floral water, certified organic extracts of calendula, chamomile, green tea and saint johnswort, organic sea kelp extract, olefin sulfonate, cocamidopropyl betaine, certified organic aloe barbodensis, panthenol, soy protein, certified organic jojoba oil, vegetable glycerin, citric acid, methyl/propylparaben, and pure essential oils.

* Terressentials: Lavender Garden Pure Earth Hair Wash
Infusions of organic nettle, organic chamomile and organic shavegrass in distilled water, natural clay minerals, organic tincture of wildcrafted linden flower, essential oils of organic true lavender, organic sweet orange, organic rose geranium, organic ylang ylang and organic clove bud.

So why do companies use petroleum based ingredients?

Many effective surfactants and preservatives are derived from petroleum. Most of these ingredients were introduced during WWII and since the 1960's have become integral to manufacturing personal care products. Today, consumers expect high performance, non-toxic soaps with a long shelf life.

Government and industry testing has shown that the most common petroleum-based surfactants have very low health risks compared to their

results and price effectiveness. Most products without preservatives last a year at the most; whereas, synthetic preservatives promise a shelf life of two years or more.

Effectiveness, economy, and low health risks create a winning formula for many manufacturers against which green-minded companies must compete. New methods for deriving similar compounds from plants have helped level the playing field. More mainstream companies are producing healthier alternatives and others already committed in this regard are expanding their market with more commercial products.

Products

If you are simply looking for truly natural and organic personal care products made to exacting standards without any synthetic ingredients or additives, consider the following companies:

Real Purity Products (800-253-1694; www.realpurityproducts.com)

Aubrey Organics (800-282-7394; www.aubrey-organics.com)

The Natural Alchemist (www.naturalalchemist.com)

Terressentials (301-371-7333; www.terressentials.com)

Evan's Garden (727-449-0900; www.evansgarden.com)

- By Vincent Standbey for The Green Guide, www.thegreenguide.com

For more information, contact:

Paul McRandle
Senior Research Editor
The Green Guide Institute
PO Box 567, Prince Street Station
New York, NY 10012
pmcrandle@thegreenguide.com

Web site:

www.thegreenguide.com