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Skin Deep

Nutri-Cosmetics: Eat, Drink and Be Skeptical

By NATASHA SINGER

SCOTT-VINCENT BORBA, an entrepreneur in Woodland Hills, Calif., makes elixirs called Borba Skin Balance Water that hold all the allure of the fountain of youth. Shelves in refrigerators at Sephora stores under signs marked "Drinkable Skincare," the plastic bottles contain mixtures of vitamins and plant extracts that promise to enhance the skin.

The label on the "replenishing" water, for example, says it has been "scientifically proven to improve moisture levels by an average of 66 percent," while the "firming" water advertises itself as "scientifically proven to improve elasticity by an average of 24 percent."

Last year, Americans bought about one million bottles of Borba water, which cost \$2.50 each, Mr. Borba said. They also bought the brand's "skin treatment infused" gummy bears (\$25) and powders (\$23) that promise to help improve cellulite and stretch-mark-prone areas in seven days.

"If you put good things into your body, your skin should reap the benefits," Mr. Borba said. "You already drink water and you already eat candy and chocolate, so I am putting skin care into your water and your candy and your chocolate."

For decades, cosmetic companies have manufactured face creams that offer hope in a jar. But now a growing number of beauty brands are introducing hope in a pill, a water bottle or even a candy bar.

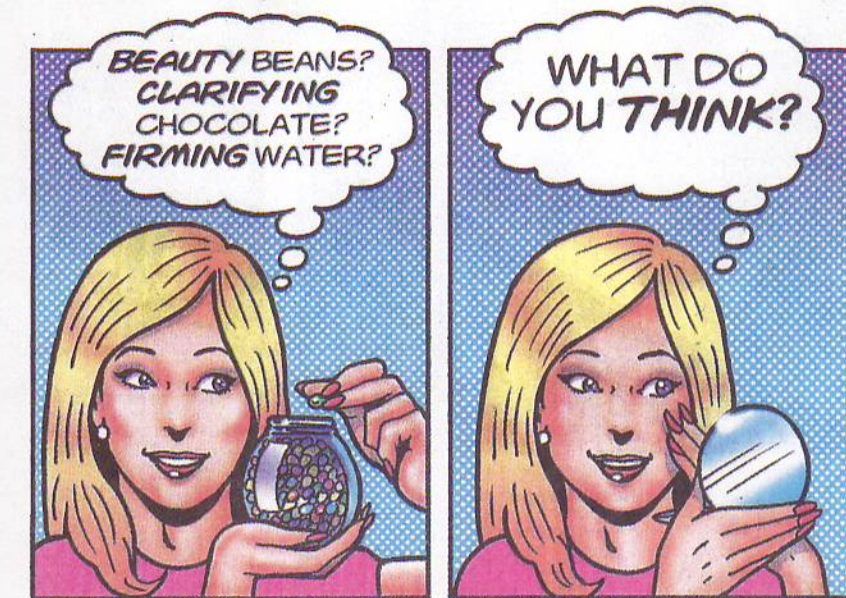
Marketers refer to this new skin-care category as "internal beauty" or "nutri-cosmetics." It includes pills, liquids and snacks formulated with substances like biotin, niacin, omega-3 fatty acids, pomegranate and green tea that promise to improve the look of skin, hair and nails.

But critics said there is little scientific proof behind the premise that these items will improve the look of the skin.

"We would all love to get smoother, younger, more elastic skin in seven days just by chugging drinks, eating candy bars or chewing gummy bear vitamins," said Wahida Karmaly, the director of nutrition at the Irving Center for Clinical Research at Columbia University Medical Center. "But skin doesn't work that way. There is no magic bullet."

Dr. Karmaly, who has a Ph.D. in public health, added that a diet of whole grains, vegetables, fruits, lean proteins and "plain old water" helps skin stay healthy. She advised consulting with a nutritionist or a doctor before taking any kind of dietary supplement because mega-doses of certain vitamins can be unhealthy, she said.

Since food helps maintain skin health, one might assume that supplements improve



Dynamic Duo Studio

skin. But Dr. James M. Spencer, a dermatologist in St. Petersburg, Fla., who has studied the use of ingestible substances to inhibit skin cancer, said that there is little scientific validation for the idea that dietary supplements can beautify well-nourished people.

"If you are already a healthy 55-year-old woman in New York, or if you just had pizza for lunch, I doubt you will look prettier if you take beauty vitamins," said Dr. Spencer, a clinical professor of dermatology at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in Manhattan.

He added that scientists know little about how beauty supplements affect the skin because they are considered dietary supplements, products that are not vetted by the Food and Drug Administration before they arrive in stores.

The manufacturers are responsible for the content and safety of these products and for the validity of marketing claims. But if a dietary supplement claims beneficial effects, it must bear a disclaimer that the F.D.A. has not evaluated the claims and that the product is not intended to "diagnose,

treat, cure or prevent any disease."

Five years ago, very few Americans bought nutri-cosmetics. But last year Americans spent about \$50 million on them, according to Kline & Company, a market research firm that tracks cosmetics sales.

Carrie Mellage, an industry manager for consumer products at Kline, said that worldwide sales of nutri-cosmetics reached \$1 billion last year, largely because of sales in Europe and Asia. In Japan, for example, Ewa Confectionery makes "collagen marshmallows" that claim to plump skin, and in France, Noreva sells "gourmet anti-aging jam" in flavors like melon-mango or tomato-green tea. Ms. Mellage said that increased interest in holistic medicine and organic food is driving sales.

Mr. Borba, who has developed product ideas for beauty companies, started his business after deciding that he spent too much time drinking mineral water, applying grooming products and taking 15 different supplements a day. His idea: Combine the three in one product. In 2005, he intro-

duced Borba waters at Fred Segal Beauty in Santa Monica, Calif. This year sales will reach 2.5 million bottles, he said.

The products are based on the idea of skin bioavailability — that if nutrients are made available, skin cells will absorb them and thus improve the skin's appearance, he said.

"Consumers understand that you and your skin are what you eat," he said. "Elixirs, droplets and effervescent tablets that fortify your skin from the inside out will become the skin care of choice in the next five years."

Dr. Howard Murad, a dermatologist in El Segundo, Calif., who founded his own cosmetic line in 1989, is one of a number of doctors selling nutri-cosmetics. The label on Murad Optimal Health and Beauty dietary supplement says the pills are "scientifically proven to improve skin hydration by 40 percent" and "increase skin firmness by 58 percent."

Dr. Murad said he developed his supplements out of his own

research, based on the idea that humans have been using nutrients to improve health for thousands of years.

"The idea of food as medicine has been around forever, but we are only just rediscovering it," said Dr. Murad, an associate clinical professor of medicine in dermatology at the Geffen School of Medicine at the University of California, Los Angeles. He said ancient Egyptians used pomegranate to treat intestinal disorders. Now, he said, "U.C.L.A. has started studying the effects of pomegranate juice on prostate cancer."

BUT critics said that just because certain nutrients can help cure diseases does not automatically mean that their use in dietary supplements beautifies the skin.

"There isn't yet evidence to support the use of these enhanced skin in healthy people," said Paul M. Coates, the director of the Office of Dietary Supplements of the National Institutes of Health. "It doesn't mean that they don't work, but we can't say with any certainty that they do work."

Dr. Coates, who has a Ph.D. in genetics, said that nutri-cosmetics could be validated only by clinical trials published in peer-reviewed scientific journals. But very few such rigorous tests are done on beauty supplements, he said.

Mr. Borba said that the claims on his waters are based on independent studies that he paid for. The company's Web site, www.borba.net, says that a technician visually evaluated volunteers' skin for wrinkles, dryness, elasticity and clarity over 28 days.

Dr. Murad said the claims on his supplements are based on studies by an independent laboratory that used devices like a corneometer to measure hydration and a ballistometer to measure elasticity. He published a study in 2001 in the Journal of Cosmetic Dermatology showing that eight people who ate pomegranate supplements and used a pomegranate lotion slightly increased protection from sun damage.

"I am not claiming that this is scientific study on the level of what we expect from Harvard research," Dr. Murad said. But a recent anecdotal study of 70 of his patients found supplements improved their skin.

"Ideally, the best thing you could do for your skin is to eat a lot better," he said. "But it's difficult to eat a huge amount of fresh food, so you can supplement."

Dr. Spencer said nutri-cosmetics are mostly marketing. "They are unlikely to hurt you," he said. "But they may hurt your pocketbook."

An Internal Route to External Beauty?

BEAUTY products that you eat represent a small but growing trend. To test the claims of a few, Dr. James M. Spencer, a dermatologist who has studied the use of ingestible substances to inhibit skin cancer, examined ingredient lists and labels.

BORBA SKIN BALANCE CONFECTIONS ACAI SKIN TREATMENT INFUSED GUMMI BOOSTERS, \$25 for approximately 136, www.sephora.com. These candies promise to help enhance skin clarity and radiance. But according to Dr. Spencer, "These are just gummy bears with very low levels of vitamins in them."

CORNELIA SKIN CLARIFYING DRINKING TEA, \$24 for 2.7 ounces, www.cornelia.com. This aromatic tea of peppermint, chamomile, burdock root, lemon myrtle, marigold flowers and birch leaves, promises to clean pores and soothe irritated skin. Dr. Spencer said that was unlikely, adding "I bet you already have chamomile and peppermint tea at home that is a lot cheaper."

DR. ANDREW WEIL FOR ORIGINS PLANTIDOTE MEGA-MUSHROOM SUPPLEMENT, \$35 for 1.7 ounces, www.origins.com. This green elixir promises to optimize skin's defenses against aging. Dr. Spencer said that two of the ingredients — vitamins C and E — may offer "a small amount of protection" against sun damage. "But mushrooms? Where do they come up with this stuff?"

BORBA SKIN BALANCE WATER ANTI AGING CLARIFYING, \$30 for a 12-pack of 16-ounce bottles, www.borba.net. This rose-hued drink promises to improve skin clarity and slow signs of aging. Dr. Spencer said the antioxidants may offer slight protection against sun damage. But "something that protects you doesn't make you look better now, although it might reduce your chances of looking like a wrinkled old prune 20 years from now," he said.

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TAKE BY MOUTH
Some researchers doubt the value of nutri-cosmetics.

Lars Klöve for The New York Times