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Nail-care industry tries to balance effectiveness and environmental friendliness

By Samantha Critchell
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Within the rainbow of shades that line the walls of nail salons, an increasingly popular choice is "green." But more eco-friendly options may not be quite as green as you think.

Many nail-polish manufacturers are successfully removing chemicals from their products, and spas and salons have found natural elements that help strengthen nails and pamper the skin. And for those DIY manicures and pedicures, you'll find many moisturizers and cuticle creams infused with essential oils and other botanicals.

Still, it's not quite a perfect process, with industry insiders saying there is a trade-off in some formulas between effectiveness and environmental friendliness.

Whole Foods Market does make "gentle exceptions" to its usual eco standards more often in beauty than other categories for things like artificial color and fragrance, says Jeremiah McElwee, senior global Whole Body coordinator.

The push is to get rid of toxins, but artificial color is a necessary evil for bright, vibrant colors, McElwee says. "It's something we wrestle with."

OPI and Essie, leading suppliers of nail products to salons, have both removed dibutyl phthalate, toluene and formaldehyde from polish.

Essie isn't done going "green," founder Essie Weingarten says, but it was important to her that customers would still get smooth, rich, long-lasting color. She's still working on a water-based polish, but, so far, it doesn't hold up to hand-washing.

There has been a surge in interest in shades with eco-tinged names, such as bamboo and rice. Greenport was the first to sell out at a recent trade show.

The industry did step up quickly to find less-toxic alternatives for polish, says Alex Scranton, director of science and research for Women's Voices for the Earth.

The environmental advocacy group targeted salon-brand nail polishes a few years ago mostly out of concern about the health of salon workers — a cause still near and dear to WVE's mission — but after some initial pushback, Scranton says manufacturers responded and consumers are reaping the benefits.

"We're certainly not out there telling people not to go to salons — that's not our goal — we just want them to be healthier," Scranton says.

Among the issues WVE is looking at now are air quality and the ingredients in artificial nails and nail-polish remover.

The acetone in remover has been a tough thorn to remove. There are nonacetone versions, but Weingarten says they don't work as well and Scranton can't confirm they're safer.

Essie has added eucalyptus oil to remover, however, for a more pleasant scent and as an antiseptic.

"We know what we want to do — be completely green — but we just have to figure out how to get it," Weingarten says.

Until then, Cari Cohen, owner of Health Enterprises, which runs the spa at Sunrise Springs eco-resort in Santa Fe, N.M., isn't doing any more manicures or pedicures.

Other spa products, like her massage oils, are all natural and organic and she just couldn't maintain that standard with nails, she explains. But while nails don't fit in with the spa message of health and wellness, Cohen notes that she doesn't think pedicures, for example, to be unhealthy: She stops in at a local nail salon from time to time.

Jodi Drexler Billet, executive vice president of corporate communications at Desert Essence Organics, brings her own kit to the nail salon, mostly because she wants to ensure clean tools. She also brings lavender oil to infuse the water with a calming agent that helps with cracked skin, and a spray made of oils of tea tree, rosemary and sage to replace the alcohol-based astringent many salons use as a refreshing splash.

A tea tree ointment works as a cuticle cream, too, she says.

The spa at the Ritz Carlton Half-Moon Bay in California emphasizes local, natural ingredients, including lavender and pumpkin, in its nail treatments.

Pumpkin, for example, is known to be a good exfoliator with a high concentration of enzymes, and its beta-carotene and vitamin E are antioxidants for the skin.

Whole Foods still has several natural products that help with nail care: moisturizing gloves made with organic cotton and nail files made of bamboo or sustainable wood, among them.

As for lotions, McElwee recommends looking for paraben-free formulas and those that use fruity acids, cocoa butter, shea butter and natural oils.

And, he adds, don't forget eating carrots, sweet potatoes and leafy greens, all of which have vitamin A that is known to strengthen nails.

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