

Reading Labels to Identify Allergens

Product labels are meant to tell you how to use a product wisely and safely, and often include content information. Cosmetics, over-the-counter medicines, prescription drugs, and pesticides are required by law to identify ingredients. Knowing where to look and how to read this information can help you avoid contact with substances that may cause your skin to react.

Beware of products labeled as hypoallergenic, natural or organic. These labels do not mean that the product does not contain allergens. To the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and most dermatologists, these terms are only marketing hype.



Where should you look on medicines for ingredients?

Drug Facts	
Active ingredient (in each tablet) Chlorpheniramine maleate 2 mg	Purpose Antihistamine
Uses temporarily relieves these symptoms due to hay fever or other upper respiratory allergies: ■ sneezing ■ runny nose ■ itchy, watery eyes ■ itchy throat	
Other information store at 20-25° C (68-77° F) ■ protect from excessive moisture	
Inactive ingredients D&C yellow no. 10, lactose, magnesium stearate, microcrystalline cellulose, pregelatinized starch	

Over-the-counter medicines and sunscreens must list *active* and *inactive* ingredients in a “DRUG FACTS” label, like the one shown. Be sure to check both ingredient lists to make sure that your allergen(s) is not listed.

Prescription drugs must also list *active* and *inactive* ingredients. You can find this information in the package insert, and on patient information supplied with the drug. Your pharmacist can also help you identify the drug’s active and inactive ingredients.

Where should you look on cosmetics for ingredient information?

Cosmetics are products that cleanse, beautify or alter your appearance, such as makeup, body lotions and hand cleansers. By law, they must have ingredient information listed on the label. Ingredients are often listed in descending order, so that the first chemical in the list is present in the greatest amount. But if ingredient concentrations are less than 1%, these ingredients may be listed in any order.

Does a product MSDS contain ingredient information?

Yes. At work, Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) contain information about ingredients, properties and hazards of products in the workplace. By law, MSDS must list any hazardous ingredient whose concentration is greater than 1%. Ideally, MSDS would list all product ingredients with chemical names. But because the laws vary by state, MSDS information can be incomplete and sometimes confusing. If you have questions or concerns about a product or chemical at work, talk to your employer or contact the product manufacturer.

Where else can you look for ingredient information on products?

If a product contains a pesticide, it must identify *active* and *inactive* (or *inert*) ingredients on the label. Therefore, products used in lawn and garden care, or to control insects will have this information on the label. Products that contain disinfectants or antibacterial agents – such as most dishwashing soaps and hand soaps – must also list this information.

For more information about product labels, you can visit the web sites of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (www.osha.gov), FDA (www.fda.gov/opacom/morecons.html) and Environmental Protection Agency (www.epa.gov/epahome/topics.html).

The United States National Library of Medicine also has web sites with product content information at Haz-Map: Occupational Exposure to Hazardous Agents (<http://hazmap.nlm.nih.gov/>) and the Household Product Database (<http://householdproducts.nlm.nih.gov/>). Learning to read labels may seem challenging, but it can help you safely use household and work products, as well as avoid products that contain your allergen.