

BEAUTY; TIME TO TOSS THEM?

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Not that I'm pointing fingers. Even I keep beauty products longer than I should -- especially if they're expensive. But if you've ever seen those close-up images of the bacteria that feast on your lipstick, blush, eyeliner and everything else in your makeup bag when they are long past their prime, you'll change your tune. Use those outdated products and those very same bacteria just might infect you. Time to roll up your sleeves, march into your bathroom -- garbage bag in hand -- and start throwing away your old and possibly infested cosmetics and skin-care products.

Unlike the European Union's Cosmetics Directive, which requires expiration dates on cosmetic products whose "minimum durability" is less than 30 months, there are no regulations under U.S. law to require cosmetic companies to print expiration dates on products. But some U.S. cosmetic companies are voluntarily using Period After Opening, or PAO, symbols that specify how long the product is safe to use after opening.

Look for a tiny open-jar symbol on your cosmetic product with an "M" (for month) stamped on it preceded by a number such as 3, 6 or 12. If you see the PAO symbol with 12M stamped on it, for example, the company is telling you that the product should be good to use for 12 months after opening.

To help jog your memory, put little stickers on your cosmetic and skin-care items and write the date of opening on the sticker. You can purchase small stickers at an office supply store, or from [Beauty Alert \(beautyalert.biz\)](#) or Timestrip (timestrip.com), which sell stickers especially made to keep track of the day you first use beauty products. Some cosmetics and sunscreens do have an expiration date printed on them. But note that sunscreen is usually only fully effective for six months to a year.

The problem with PAO guidelines (and even expiration dates) is that though they're a good start, they don't account for how you store and use your cosmetics -- both of which can affect shelf life. The Food & Drug Administration warns consumers that cosmetic expiration dates are simply "rules of thumb," and that a product's safety may "expire long before the expiration date if the product has not been properly stored."

Dr. Zein Obagi, a Beverly Hills dermatologist who's been in practice for more than 30 years and created Obagi skin-care products, warns against supersizing. "Women want to buy something that they can use forever so that they don't have to buy it again," Obagi says. "Unfortunately, that doesn't happen. That's why they put cosmetic products in small containers, because they should be used in

a short period of time." So sidestep the industrial-sized face cream -- better instead to buy the small size more often.

Obagi says that if you keep any product too long or expose it to air or direct sunlight it will degrade. "Chemical changes occur in the formula, and there's going to be evaporation and a high concentration of chemicals especially irritating for sensitive skin and in sensitive areas like around the eyes," he says. "Vitamin C, retinol, hydroquinone, glycolic acid -- all ingredients are vulnerable."

Obagi says that vitamin C becomes unstable and loses efficacy after a few weeks.

"Aside from a dry mineral powder, everything is susceptible to being highly contaminated," he says, adding that one solution is airtight packaging. Air can cause contamination, as can dipping your fingers into containers.

If you keep cosmetics in warm, humid or hot areas -- for instance, your bathroom, like just about everyone does -- you're risking problems. "You may open the product for just one minute and that humidity will be a fertile ground to allow mold, bacteria, fungus and streptococcus to grow," Obagi says. "You find these contaminants in old makeup and skin-care products." Using products like these makes you vulnerable to infections, acne, pustules and scarring. "Even if a product is kept away from sun and heat I wouldn't use it after two years even if it was sealed," Obagi says.

And don't forget your loofah, sponges and washcloths as you're cleaning out your beauty products. Edward J. Bottone, professor emeritus of medicine/infectious diseases at Mount Sinai School of Medicine, published an article about infected loofahs in the *Journal of Clinical Microbiology*. "Loofahs are especially vulnerable to bacterial growth," Bottone says. "These natural sponges have many nooks and crannies that, especially when moist, invite bacteria."

Bacteria feed off carbohydrates and proteins in the loofah -- including dead skin. "I once had a woman come to me who had a horrible rash and infection and couldn't figure out what it was from," Bottone says. "I had her bring in her loofah and other wash items. Her loofah was green with mold and bacteria. If you have little cuts in your skin and wash with an infected loofah you can be infected."

Any moist loofah, washcloth or even a synthetic sponge can cause rashes such as folliculitis, an infection of the hair follicles that often looks like clusters of small, red bumps. Bottone suggests cleaning loofahs, sponges and washcloths in a 1% bleach solution weekly. Or you can put your washcloth and sponges (as long as they don't contain metal) in the microwave for three to five minutes to disinfect. (The microwave trick doesn't work with a loofah, however, since the microwave will make it harden.) Wring washcloths and sponges out thoroughly and air-dry in a well-ventilated area. Throw away loofahs every three weeks and sponges every six to eight weeks.

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Use it, then lose it

How long should you keep products? Expert opinions vary a bit, but dermatologist Dr. Zein Obagi recommends the following:

Cream and gel cleansers: One year

Serums: Six months

Liquid foundation: Six months if it is in squeezable packaging, two months in any other form

Concealer: Three months

Loose powder: Two years

Pressed powder: 18 months

Liquid highlighter: Two months

Eye shadow: Two years if powder, two months if it's cream, unless it is in a squeezable or airtight container

Mascara: Three months (but discard sooner if it dries out)

Eyeliner: Up to three years for pencils that are sharpened regularly, two months for cream or liquid eyeliners

Blush: Two years for powder, two months for cream

Makeup sponges: Wash after each use and throw away after two weeks

Lipstick: One year

Lip gloss: 18 months

Lip liner: Up to three years if sharpened regularly

Nail polish: One year

The FDA also offers a few helpful tips:

Keep everything clean. Always wash your hands before applying a product, and avoid putting fingers in cosmetics. Instead, use a clean spatula, disposable sponge or cotton swab.

Don't share cosmetics.

Say AaAnoAaA to kohl. Not the hue, but the ingredient kohl. It isn't approved for cosmetic use in the United States because of lead and other dangers.

Avoid eye products if you have an eye infection, and throw away lip products if you've used them during an illness.

Store cosmetics in airtight containers, away from sunlight and at temperatures lower than 85 degrees.

Try the smell test. If products have an unusual or foul odor, discard them. Also discard if there are changes in texture, consistency or color.

Avoid pumping the mascara wand in and out of the tube, which can allow air and bacteria to get in. Instead, twist it slowly in a circle.

Be aware that all-natural or preservative-free cosmetics usually have a shorter shelf life than products with preservatives and must be

tossed sooner.

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