

SKIN DEEP Enzymes Try to Grab the Spotlight

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MATTHEW COOPER was living on Tums, [Pepto-Bismol](#) and [Zantac](#) and experiencing such a bad case of [irritable bowel syndrome](#), he'd frequently have to abandon his wife and friends at restaurants midmeal. He had [leg cramps](#), [insomnia](#) and chronic cases of fatigue and [acid reflux](#). And then a friend turned him on to enzymes.

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Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

"Within a week, they changed my life," said Dr. Cooper, a Miami chiropractor who runs the Enzyme Therapy Center there, one of a growing number of holistic medical practices dedicated to treating ailments like [acne](#) and sports injuries with enzymes.

The human body contains two kinds of enzymes: metabolic, which are found in every cell of the body and cause various chemical reactions, and digestive, which are released in the stomach and intestines and help break food down into usable nutrients. A third kind, known as food enzymes, are found in uncooked nuts, vegetables and fruit. Raw-food advocates argue that, when eaten, food enzymes can help "predigest" nutrients, a process they claim allows the body to use less of its own digestive enzymes and direct more energy to other functions, like organ repair and detoxification.

But the science behind this is dubious. "Most people digest just fine," said Dr. Donald Kirby, the director of the Center for Human Nutrition at Cleveland Clinic's Digestive Disease Institute. "If you really need an enzyme supplement, then you have a medical condition and are probably under the care of a physician."

Even so, raw-food diets and juice fasts, which have been championed by the actress Gwyneth Paltrow and the designer Donna Karan, have grown in popularity. But some find the rigid regimens, which can involve extensive shopping, preparation and luridly colored liquids, difficult to follow. "That's why enzymes come in handy," said Robert Dagger, who owns High Vibe, a raw-food lifestyle store in the East Village that sells fresh-pressed juices, books and enzyme supplements in capsule form that Mr. Dagger formulates himself. "I'll be out to dinner with people who aren't healthy at all, and at the end of dinner they break out the enzymes," he said.

The ingredient is also increasingly popular in mainstream beauty products, after years in the health-food aisle as an alternative to chemical exfoliants like glycolic and salicylic acids. Bromelain, an enzyme found in pineapple, and papain, which derives from papaya, are star ingredients in the clarifying facial mask and the night cream from Rx Skin Therapy. Next month, Natura Bissé, a Spanish luxury skin-care company, will start selling NB-Ceutical tolerance enzyme peel, an at-home peel with prickly pear and papaya enzymes geared toward sensitive skin.

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Celebrities including Drew Barrymore and Channing Tatum are followers of a nutritionist who advises taking digestive enzymes every day.

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Channing Tatum.

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Enzymes are also an important component in a few products from Immunologie, a skin-care line introduced in 2010 and made with ingredients that are blended together via fermentation rather than heating. The company's founder, Manzoor Jaffery, decided to start experimenting with enzymes because he'd read that they were added to animal feed to aid in digestion and thought the same idea could apply to the skin to help ingredients penetrate more deeply. "The enzymes break down the amino acids into smaller molecules," said Mr. Jaffery, a cosmetic chemist in Stratford, Conn., who holds multiple patents on skin-care ingredients.

Dr. Adam R. Kolker, a Manhattan plastic surgeon, sells a line of products that includes a papaya face polish. "For skin that is sensitive, enzymes are wonderful," Dr. Kolker said. "Enzymes affect the peptide bonds — protein-based adhesions — between cells on the dead outer layer of skin cells. In time that bond will break; what the enzymes do is speed that reaction," he explained, adding that as skin ages, that process slows down, making skin appear dull and flat.

Those who believe beauty starts from within might be curious about "The Beauty Detox Solution," a [diet](#) guide released last spring by Kimberly Snyder, a nutritionist in Los Angeles and New York who advocates taking one digestive enzyme a day, plus before eating cooked food. "It's one of the few supplements I recommend," said Ms. Snyder, whose celebrity following includes Drew Barrymore and Channing Tatum. "Enzymes are one of the secrets to longevity," she said.

With endorsements like that, it's no surprise that [AST Enzymes](#), an enzyme supplement manufacturer based in California, said that sales of its products increased by 35 percent last year. And in the United States, sales of Almased, a weight-loss supplement that includes "enzyme-rich honey," more than doubled from 2009 to 2011, according to the company. (Spins, a research company in Schaumburg, Ill., says that about \$97.5 million enzyme supplements were sold in stores in the nation last year, a figure that excludes Walmart and Whole Foods.)

But not everyone believes that money is well spent. Janine Whiteson, a Manhattan nutritionist, advises clients with bloating to eat pineapple and papaya and drink herbal tea before turning to capsules. "There's no great scientific study that says these supplements help," she said.

And Dr. Neal Barnard, the president and founder of the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, a nonprofit group in Washington, questions whether enzyme supplements can have anything more than a trivial impact on health. "There are so many differences between raw food and cooked food that we really have no basis to attribute these differences to enzymes," Dr. Barnard said.

Jill Martin, a television personality who takes up to 14 of the enzyme capsules that Dr. Cooper has prescribed each day, said she has noticed an appreciable difference in her energy level and physique since she started the regimen three years ago. "I'm definitely leaner," she said.

But Dr. Kirby, of the Center for Human Nutrition, cautioned: "Buyer beware."

"For the average American looking to lose weight or improve their digestion, the odds of these enzyme supplements doing this are not high," he said.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: March 15, 2012

The Skin Deep column on Feb. 23, about digestive enzymes, misspelled, at one point, the surname of the founder of Immunologie, a company that makes skin care products. He is Manzoor Jaffery, not Jaffrey.

A version of this article appeared in print on February 23, 2012, on page E3 of the New York edition with the headline: Enzymes Try to Grab the Spotlight.

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