What's the Skinny on Skin Care?

"What products can I use on my skin during pregnancy and breastfeeding?" As a MotherToBaby information specialist answering our texting service, every day I get questions about any type of product you can think of that can be applied to your skin! Anything from itching and antibiotic creams, vitamin C products, essential oils, homeopathic creams and gels, acne products, to cosmetics and skin care products. Pregnancy and breastfeeding can be stressful times, and since we always want what is best for the baby, we all worry that a product we are using on our skin may get to the baby and be a problem. But is it true? What should you worry about and what can you use (as directed) without concerns?

Your Skin

First, lets talk about your skin and how topical products (things you put on your skin) get into your system. Your skin is a large, dynamic living tissue that is made up of different layers. We need to understand the absorption process in order to evaluate the safety of cosmetic, medicinal, and chemical products that come into contact with our skin. When a substance is put on your skin, it first has to go through the outer layer of the skin called the stratum corneum, which is made up of dead cells. Then come the living layers of our skin, the epidermis (waterproof barrier), dermis (connective tissue, hair follicles and sweat glands), hypodermis (fat and connective tissue) and the vascular network.

How Much is Absorbed?

Different factors affect skin absorption, including how much is applied, the physical state of the product (is it a liquid, powder, gel, etc.), where on the body it is applied, how large of an area the product is applied to, the person's age, and whether the skin is wet or dry at the time the product is applied. Often, only 1 or 2% of an applied dose is absorbed into your system. But sometimes, more is absorbed, especially if your skin has open wounds, cracks etc. or if you have a skin condition such as eczema. In fact, how "complete" your skin is can be the most important factor in determining how effective a barrier it can be to topical products.

It can be hard to get good safety information on every type of topical product. The FDA (Food and Drug Administration) does require cosmetic products to be "safe," which is based on their specific labeling and use. Yet cosmetic products do not need FDA approval to be sold on the market, and often the companies make claims that have not been studied and cannot be proven. So it is always a good idea to check with our MotherToBaby information specialists and let us research the product and its ingredients for you.

Many times during pregnancy and breastfeeding, people worry about the use of retinoids (a class of chemical compounds contained in treatments for acne, psoriasis, wrinkles, and other skin conditions), high dose salicylic acid (a common ingredient in topical acne treatments), formaldehyde (often used as a preservative in cosmetic products), hydroquinone (a skin-lightening agent that can be used to treat age spots and sun spots), and chemical sunscreens to name a few. These products do have some concerns and should be used with caution when pregnant and nursing.

Other products that are applied to your skin have less concerns in most instances. These include over-the-counter antibiotic creams, corticosteroid creams (used to reduce skin inflammation and irritation from things insect bites or poison oak/ivy, but also in treatments for eczema and psoriasis), essential oils, menthol and lidocaine type products (used in products to cool or numb the skin), hydrogen peroxide (used in treatments for acne, sun spots, and age

spots), fluoride and dental products, homeopathic creams and gels, vitamin C products (used in treatments to reduce fine lines and as an antioxidant to protect the skin), and things that you put on your hair and nails.

So that is the skinny on skin care! You might be able to use more products on your skin than you thought you could during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Even with a product that is considered low risk, you may want to check with your healthcare provider or with us if you have any concerns before using. We have a number of fact sheets and blogs that can answer some of your questions about topical products, and our information specialists are always happy to answer your questions by phone, text, email, or chat.

Questions? Call 866.626.6847 | Text 855.999.3525 | Email or Chat at MotherToBaby.org.

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