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Gold Face Cream: A Costly Leap of Faith

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CHRISTINE VALMY'S Golden Collagen facial mask is a visual and tactile delight: gelatinous, face-shaped and thoroughly golden, it arrives in a sheer plastic enclosure that invites you to squish it the way that bubble wrap begs you to pop it.

I couldn't wait to put it on and lie down for the recommended time. Cool and slimy, it feels like Jell-O on the face.

The rash that erupted the next day did not.

"That's not from the gold," said Marina Valmy De Haydu, president of the skin care company founded by her mother. "Gold is not irritating to the skin at all." Rather, she said, it was another ingredient in the mask — arbutin — that had given me problems.

"When you have very sensitive skin, you have to be more than careful with masks," she advised, sounding eerily like my dermatologist.

While doctors may disagree with her about whether gold can be irritating, it has become a go-to ingredient in skin care products. It has been flaked, liquefied and otherwise suffused in moisturizers and sunscreens, eye creams and lip balms. Spas advertise 24-karat gold facials, a splurge typically costing north of \$100. Fancy brands like La Prairie and Guerlain sell golden wares at high-end stores like Nordstrom.

Does anyone remember "Goldfinger" ?

Apparently they do. I asked the owner of Chantecaille, a brand that sells products like a Nano Gold Energizing Cream (\$420 for 1.7 ounces at [Neiman Marcus](#) and [Bergdorf Goodman](#)), what customers typically ask before they buy.

"They want to know if it's toxic," Sylvie Chantecaille, the owner, said by telephone. "The second thing they want to know is what form it is, what is with it and exactly what it's going to do."

When cosmetics executives describe the purported benefits of gold for the skin, they seem to be reading from the same PowerPoint slide: anti-aging, anti-inflammatory, anti-[acne](#). People who sell creams with visible gold flecks talk about the ability of those flecks to warm the skin and make it conducive to other ingredients. People who sell gold in nano form — that is, in microscopic particles suspended in a liquid mixture known as a colloid — look down on this crowd, saying that gold can confer benefits only when it is broken down small enough to penetrate the skin.

“Gold flecks won’t do anything to your skin other than make it look pretty,” said Laura DeLuisa LaRocca, founder of [LaRocca Skincare](#), which sells a line of modestly priced products with gold in them (like 24K Gold Active Vitamin Repair Mist, \$29 for 1.7 ounces). “Colloidal gold is the best option when you’re using gold.”

“I’ve been using it for two years, and it definitely has changed my skin,” Ms. LaRocca said of her line. “It has tightened it, it has toned it, my lines have faded probably 40 percent.”

But is it true that gold has therapeutic qualities? That depends if you ask someone who is selling it suspended in cream or someone who went to medical school. Dermatologists speak with one voice, saying that gold cannot help you, but it absolutely can hurt you, causing inflammatory reactions like [contact dermatitis](#) (which may be what happened to me). In high doses, gold can be toxic, but these products probably don’t contain enough of it to make that happen, doctors say.

Dr. Judith Hellman, a dermatologist in New York City, did research into gold face creams after enough magazine beauty editors pestered her about them. “At best, they do nothing, and at worst, they can give you irritation of the skin,” she said. “I would tell people to put that money into gold that they can wear around their neck or on their fingers.”

Dr. Jeannette Graf, a dermatologist in Great Neck, N.Y., went further, saying she had done “intensive medical searches on this very ingredient” and found that “there are absolutely no scientific studies that show that gold has any effect in firming or revitalizing the skin, nor that it reduces [wrinkles](#) or gives skin a plumped, golden glow.” (She has her own skin care line — with no gold in it — sold on HSN.) But Dr. Graf did find that [gold was named “allergen of the year” in 2001 by the American Contact Dermatitis Society](#).

The skin care companies tend to counter these statements by saying that they have proprietary research showing the benefits of gold. Over at La Prairie, which sells three products with colloidal gold, Holly Genovese, a vice president, said that the company’s scientists had found a way to use gold that is valuable to the skin.

“Colloidal gold does help to maintain your skin’s elasticity and firmness,” she said. “Gold itself is known to have very soothing benefits to it.”

When La Prairie’s Cellular Radiance Concentrate Pure Gold (\$580 an ounce) was introduced in 2006, it was “the first big, major introduction of any major cosmetic company using gold in a skin care product,” Ms. Genovese said. The product, which she described as “a multitasking serum for the face,” has been “a huge hit for us,” she said.

La Prairie has just come out with a line of products that contain colloidal platinum — including [a cream that costs \\$1,000 an ounce](#) — and plans this fall to introduce a gold-infused sunscreen/moisturizer that will cost \$425 for 1.7 ounces. “Our customers are waiting with bated breath,” Ms. Genovese said.

Gold is certainly an “it” color this year, on everything from gladiator sandals to slouchy handbags to eye shadow. And the price of gold may have something to do with it: it has been fetching record prices, in the vicinity of \$1,200 an ounce, in the commodities market.

While that does give cosmetics companies an easy reason to jack up prices, not all products that contain gold are wildly expensive. At one end of the spectrum is La Prairie. At the other is the Christine Valmy mask that I tried, which costs \$13.50 for one application.

Another line is Oro Gold, whose manufacturer, Mazal Enterprise, boasts that its products contain both nano gold and gold flakes. In a telephone interview, Keren Ballard, a marketing executive for Oro Gold, outlined a number of benefits: gold, she said, is hypoallergenic, stimulates blood circulation, reduces sunspots and acts as an antioxidant.

“The gold actually acts like a small charger, because it’s metal and we have electricity in our bodies,” she said. “Whenever gold comes into contact with our bodies, it gives a boost of activity, which is good for restoring the lost elasticity properties of the tissue.” I asked whether wearing gold jewelry had the same effect. “It will work only on the specific area you’re wearing the jewelry,” Ms. Ballard said. “It will not recharge the cells. The gold would have to penetrate the skin to do that.”

In marketing materials, companies that sell gold creams are far more circumspect. The [Food and Drug Administration](#) does not recognize gold as an active ingredient, though it is recognized as a colorant by the [Personal Care Products Council](#), a trade association.

At [Dyanna Spa](#), a body and nail salon in Manhattan, the owners let me look at a package of the powder used to create the signature mask in their 24KT Gold Mask Facial. The active ingredients of the mask, made by a company called Farah, are listed as sugar (which the package said “regulates skin movements”), gold pigments (“provides shine”) and betaine (“moisturizer”).

The spa, which also offers facials with caviar, recommends the gold one for older clients. The use of gold as a beauty treatment “goes back to Chinese history and Cleopatra,” said Mona Winograd, an owner of Dyanna Spa.

Indeed, Cleopatra was cited by nearly everyone I spoke to who sells skin care products with gold in them. We all know that she looked exactly like the young [Elizabeth Taylor](#), but is it true that she used gold on her face as a beauty ritual?

Probably not, said Duane W. Roller, a retired classics professor who just published a [biography of Cleopatra](#). Although she did wear plenty of gold jewelry, he said, there is no reference to her using gold as a face cream. “I don’t think we have anything in the sources that tell us about what we might loosely call makeup,” he said.

Cosmetics makers also habitually cite the use of gold in medicine, where it is given to patients with [rheumatoid arthritis](#) and has been used — only experimentally — as a possible [cancer](#) treatment. [Debabrata Mukhopadhyay](#), a professor and cancer researcher at the [Mayo Clinic](#), said that while gold nanoparticles show promise, they are “highly toxic when injected in high doses in mice.” And the size of the nanoparticles matters a lot, he said, adding that it was unclear if the particles in the gold face creams were the right size to penetrate the skin.

“As a scientist, I am very skeptical unless I see research,” he said.

[Mostafa El-Sayed](#), a professor at the [Georgia Institute of Technology](#) who is also an expert in the field, said it was ridiculous to think that gold could fight wrinkles because of its use in cancer research. “The way it takes care of cancer, the nanoparticle goes only to cancer cells, none of the healthy cells,” he said.

But try telling that to all those satisfied La Prairie customers. Ms. Genovese pointed out that people keep buying her company's gold line because they perceive that it works. "These products do more than just make a promise, they deliver on that promise," she said. "In one study that was done a year ago, one client said, 'Look, next to the mortgage payment comes La Prairie.' "

Dr. Graf, for one, would not wag a finger at that client. "I do not see anything wrong with spending money on something if it is what you like," she said.