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The San Diego Union Tribune – Made in the Shades

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Union-Tribune staff writer Nina Garin and Laurel Naversen Geraghty, of The New York Times News Service, contributed to this report.

The shades of the American rainbow are getting darker. And speaking Spanish, too.

As the country's Latino population continues to grow, America 's typical, fresh-faced rosy look is being joined by the glowing shades of dark caramels and light browns.

And, of course, these new hues mean dollar signs to the cosmetic industry.

Skin-care companies with products to sell are setting their sights on Latinos – the nation's fastest-growing ethnic group, which the U.S. Census Bureau projects will make up one-fifth of the population by 2030 and one-quarter by 2050.

"I don't think it's lost on anyone that our population is shifting," said Margo Weitekamp, vice president for new ventures at Johnson & Johnson Consumer Products Co. That's why, in 2004, her company bought AMBI Skincare, a brand made for black women, and has since adapted it to appeal to women of Hispanic and Asian descent, too. Their products include fade creams, a moisturizer with sunscreen and an acne-clearing treatment to help reduce the dark marks that pimples can leave behind.



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It takes work to stay pretty. That's why Felicia Sanchez gets facials at Balensi's Institute Skin Care & Medical Spa.

Sure, blemishes are a nuisance to anyone. But it seems to be even more disturbing to Latinas.

"My Latino clients seem to take care of their skin more than (non-Latinos)," said Lorena Balensi, an aesthetician who owns Balensi's Institute Skin Care and Medical Spa in Chula Vista with her husband, Jean-Michel.

Balensi says her Hispanic clients come in for facials and other skin treatments more often than non-Latinos, whom she sees only occasionally.

"I have always wondered why that is," she said. "I think it's just part of the culture."

Hawiza Sharpe, a Chula Vista-based makeup artist, also sees the cultural difference.

She teaches makeup lessons and says her classes are always filled with young Hispanics.

"I think it's part of their environment," she said. "When it comes to my Latino clients, they always know exactly what they want. They know a lot about makeup and are interested in the latest trends."

And the big companies are trying to tap in on that culture.

Neutrogena and Aveeno Active Naturals, also owned by Johnson & Johnson, now offer a scrub, a peel, a night treatment, an eye cream and moisturizers to even the skin's tone or erase lingering acne marks – common concerns among Hispanics.

Meanwhile, Avon, which has a devoted Latina following, allocated nearly 15 percent of its media expenditures to Hispanic-specific ad campaigns in 2004, the last year tracked, and Procter & Gamble spent nearly \$150 million on Hispanic-g geared media, according to the market research firm Mintel International Group.

Sharpe, whose clientele is 75 percent Latino, said these new products are good for business.

"It's helped tremendously," she said. "I see these products aimed not only at Latinos but all minorities, and it's giving me more choices in what I use."

But even as marketers try to develop new products and appeal to the needs of the Hispanic community – a multitude of ethnicities – a larger question remains of whether Hispanic skin differs among its subgroups and from other ethnicities and if so, how.

"The answer is that no one really knows for sure," said Dr. Jeffrey Dover, an associate clinical professor of dermatology at the Yale University School of Medicine, who licenses his line, Skin Effects by Dr. Jeffrey Dover, to CVS.

Dr. Roopal V. Kundu, director of the Center for Ethnic Skin at Northwestern's Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago, said she believes that there could be qualities and characteristics shared by many Hispanics that are not common to non-Hispanics. But the research is thin.



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Lorena Balensi hydrates and exfoliates Sanchez at her Chula Vista spa. Balensi says her Latino clients visit more regularly than non-Latinos.



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“As a scientist-dermatologist, it would be nice to know if there was actually some sort of structural or biological difference” among ethnicities, Dover said. “We'd understand the mechanism of disease better, and we'd find treatments better, and we wouldn't be just guessing with ones that really don't work very well.”

In a comprehensive review of scientific studies that have been conducted on ethnic skin, Naissan O. Wesley and Dr. Howard I. Maibach of the University of California San Francisco, found few studies devoted to Hispanics. But writing in 2003 in the *American Journal of Clinical Dermatology*, they examined objective data for 10 characteristics aside from pigmentation and concluded that the evidence for nonpigment distinctions between Hispanics and others was “contradictory” and “inconclusive.”

The problem is compounded by the fact that Hispanic is a broad category. “Basically, people have been doing these studies in 'Hispanics,' in quotation marks, and I say, 'Well, who was your group – Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans?’” said Dr. Miguel Sanchez, an associate professor of dermatology at New York University School of Medicine, who lectures on Latino skin.

Academic centers such as the Center for Ethnic Skin are hoping to further the research devoted to Latinos. Physicians, too, who are seeing more Hispanic patients, are striving to learn how to better treat their skin.

“Nowadays, dermatologists recognize that there are variances, differences in the way that ethnic skin behaves,” Sanchez said of pigmentation, “and so they have actually been flocking to courses at conferences.”

Dr. Gary Brauner, associate clinical professor of dermatology at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York, said that because “descriptions of all classic dermatologic diseases are descriptions on white people,” dermatologists often find it difficult to discern harmful conditions in patients who have skin that's medium-brown or darker.

“You may see black lesions growing all over the place, and you think, 'My God, do they have melanomas all over?’” he said. “When in fact, they are just ordinary moles or very dark seborrheic keratoses, just spots you get as you get older.”

Even with the scientific research, Balensi can simplify the differences like this: oily versus dry.

“Let me tell you, Latinos are more oily, they break out more,” she said. “When I do facials on my Latino clients, I spend a lot of time on extractions.”

Other skin issues also stand out among people of Hispanic descent. Inflammatory conditions such as acne or eczema can leave lasting dark marks, Kundu said. Melasma, dappled pigment across the forehead, cheeks and upper lip, is common in women. There's also ashly dermatosis – grayish blotches on the limbs and trunk – and vitiligo, a disease of pale patches of skin.

Such pigmentary disorders can be so severe that they “ruin some women's lives,” Dover said.



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Aesthetician Lorena Balensi says her Latin clients tend to have oilier skin than her non-Latin ones.

Hispanic women said that even a mild injury to the skin – a nick, a burn, an hour in the sun or an adverse reaction to a drug – may contribute to hyperpigmentation that lasts for weeks or even months. “If I even have a scratch, it will turn a little dark,” said Damarys Vargas, 42, a portfolio manager at Citicorp in Manhattan .

Still, the biggest concern of many dermatologists is not appearance but rather that their Hispanic patients are facing an increased risk for skin cancer. The disease is on the rise among Hispanics in the United States , and diagnosis is often made weeks or months later than it is for Caucasians, Sanchez said.

“We think because we have a better ability to tan, we don't need to wear sunscreen, and then when we start getting skin cancer, we're shocked,” said Dr. Flor A. Mayoral, a Miami dermatologist who has lectured or done research for a few pharmaceutical and dermatology companies.

Dermatologists recommend that even Latinas with dark skin guard against the sun by wearing sunscreen with SPF 15 or higher. Doctors also urge Latinas to seek medical treatment if a mole bleeds or looks uneven, or if skin changes become distressing. It is no secret among physicians that remedios caseros – natural home remedies that women have used for generations – are popular among Hispanics in the United States .

“Folk remedies that are so common in the Hispanic communities are wonderful things,” Sanchez said. “We just want people to remember that should not be a substitute for traditional medicine when things are not going well.”