Ecoholic Body: Adria Vasil says you can live healthy and still look good

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Adria Vasil's green awakening took place when she was 13 years old after the Exxon Valdez oil spill. She has written her third book Ecoholic Body.

SARIKA SEHGAL PHOTO

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Life Reporter

In true green fashion, environmental writer Adria Vasil arrives on her bicycle at the Leslieville coffee shop and orders organic ginger tea. She's come to talk about the carcinogens in our body wash, estrogen-mimickers in our soap and lead in our lipstick.

That's the subject of her new book, Ecoholic Body, an earth-friendly guide to living healthy and looking good. Vasil, 36, has been writing the "Ecoholic" column for NOW Magazine since 2004 and is the author of two other books, the Canadian bestseller Ecoholic and Ecoholic Home.

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“I think people have tuned out big issues like climate change, but this stuff — deodorants, toothpaste, clothing — we all use intimately,” says Vasil. “We forget we live in an ecosystem. When we put something in us or down the drain, it comes right back at us, like a wake-up call or a slap on the side of the head from mother earth.”

Here’s an edited version of the conversation:

Your parents owned a McDonald’s in Shawinigan, Que., known for aluminum and pulp and paper plants. It doesn’t sound like an eco-childhood. How did you become an environmentalist?

We ate the quintessential Canadian processed diet. Then doctors told my father he’d be dead by age 40 if he didn’t eat better. That helped flip the family. Then the Exxon Valdez (the tanker that spilled more than 11 million gallons of crude oil off Alaska in 1989) made a massive impression on me. I was 13. I wanted to wash the seabirds. I started worrying about the world. This was fortified by my older brother who worked at a local health food store and canvassed for Greenpeace. He had developed chemical sensitivities and he led the way in the greening of the family.

What was the most difficult transition?

At the beginning, it was finding eco-friendly clothes. There was just a lot of beige hemp, which wasn’t my thing.

We’re aware of the impact of food production on the planet, but what about clothing? What’s the biggest concern?

Cotton is one of the most chemical-heavy crops — growing it uses 25 per cent of the world’s chemical insecticides. Synthetic fabrics such as nylon and polyester are derived from petrochemicals. When you put on a nylon jacket you don’t think about consuming oil.
Can you give me an ecotour of what you’re wearing right now?

Yeah, this top (a grey, wraparound, v-neck) is an Elroy, a sustainable line out of British Columbia. This shirt is either hemp or organic cotton, I forget. My blue jeans are second-hand from a clothing swap. My boots are vegetable-dyed with recycled rubber soles and leather. My jacket was made from old leather coats sewn together.

Advice for clothing?

Buy less. Go second hand — that’s the cleanest you can buy. The clothing doesn’t have to be grown, sewn or flown. If you do buy new, look for eco-friendly Canadian-made clothes. We now have great green fashion designers in this country.

Nobody wants to apply toxins to their bodies. For skin lotions, what should you look for?

You should avoid the Mean 15, the list of ingredients in the book. I use fair trade coconut oil and grapeseed oil in the winter for dry skin. Any quality kitchen oil, such as safflower oil, will do the trick. I say keep it simple — keep lotions edible.

Sunscreens?

I’ve done product testing on sunscreens and the best I found is a line called Green Beaver, available in health food stores.

There’s been a lot of concern about toxic makeup. What do you wear?

There’s a line called 100 per cent Pure Cosmetics that’s made with pigments from fruits and vegetables. I also like blush and lipstick from Revolution Organics. I use Earthlab Cosmetics mascara during the week and one from ZuZu on the weekend for more oomph.

Lots of products are labelled “natural.” How do you avoid “greenwashing,” deceptive marketing?

It’s a minefield. If you read the ingredient list and can’t tell if they’re all natural, the quickest thing is look for a third-party seal, such as Natural Products Association Certified or Ecocert. Or USDA organic. That’s my favourite. It’s food grade.

It’s hard to be totally green. Are you resisting any changes?

For awhile I had a secret stash of antiperspirants. That was the last to go. If I can go all the way, you can, too.

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