Adria Vasil is the author of the new book, Ecoholic Body, which offers an earth-friendly guide to living healthy and looking good.

Photograph by: Courtesy, Random House, Handout

If you’ve ever tried an organic shampoo or an all-natural deodorant and were not impressed, you’re not alone.

Adria Vasil feels your pain. But she also urges you not to throw in the towel on eco-friendly products.

The green-living expert behind the Ecoholic and Ecoholic Home books has just launched her latest eco bible, which is all about personal care.
In Ecoholic Body: Your Ultimate Earth-Friendly Guide to Living Healthy & Looking Good (Vintage Canada, 2012, $29.95), Vasil uses the knowledge she’s gained from living the green life for more than 20 years to create a comprehensive guide to all the things we put on or in our bodies every day to look and feel better.

Not only does she take a closer look at some of the ingredients found in everything from shampoos to cough syrups, she also calls out companies that aren’t quite as green as they seem.

And, perhaps most importantly for those trying to dip their toes into the natural or organic market, Ecoholic Body provides plenty of honest reviews on all kinds of eco-friendly products to help you find ones that actually are quite impressive.

To find out more, we spoke with Vasil about what we can do to feel good about those products that help us look so darn good.

Q: What prompted you to write a book specifically on personal care products?

A: Well, I had covered about 20 pages of body stuff in my first book and got a lot of questions from readers after, and I realized there was a lot more to say related to the body.

And there’s a sea of products that we put on, in and around our bodies and I just thought we needed more of an exhaustive guide on how to make choices.

Q: In the book, you talk about being a girlie-girl growing up. Are you still into fashion and makeup?

A: I love fashionable clothes and I do wear some makeup. I don’t necessarily wear as much as every woman around town, but I do wear concealer and mascara and eyeliner and I like a little lipstick.

I wouldn’t say that if you looked at me that I look the quintessential environmentalist that you picture from the ‘70s. . . . If you were to meet me, you’d know that I love clothes and I like to style my hair and wear makeup and all that stuff. I like to look good.

And while all these things seem kind of trivial, at the same time, there are massive ramifications and a large impact behind each of these products — (such as) industries and smokestacks.

We can cut out the chemical middle man in a lot of instances and just go back to nature for a lot of these products and still look good and smell good. . . . The product testing and turning myself into a bit of a natural lab rat so I can put them all to the test and tell you which natural products work and which ones don’t was important to me.

I’ve heard a lot of people who’ve said, ‘I’ve tried a natural shampoo or deodorant or whatnot and it didn’t work for me, so I’m not going to buy it any more’ and I cringe when I hear that because I think, oh no, I don’t want to lose you! Come back! And here’s a list of products that I’ve tried that I know work and this is the name of the brand and most of them are made in Canada so you
can find them at your local health food stores or drugstore. So I try to make it easy and take the
guesswork out of it for people.

Q: Is it hard to get women to try natural options?

A: I think more and more Canadian women are opening their minds to trying more natural and
organic options. Absolutely.

That’s why you can walk into your local drugstore and see the Pantenes and Suaves and
TRESemmes offering natural lines — whether they’re as natural as they claim to be is another
matter, but I think that’s because women are saying, ‘You know what, I’m willing now to test
this out and try more natural products because I’m not really crazy about putting so many toxins
in my body. I didn’t realize they were in there and I don’t know if I want to keep doing that. . . .’

For fashion, it’s a bit more difficult sometimes because people in general have this idea that eco
clothes are basically a burlap sack.

And trust me, if it looked like that today, I would not be wearing them.

Q: Can you explain about greenwashers?

A: There is a lot of greenwash out there — companies that are kind of fudging their green
credentials and claiming to be more natural and organic than they actually are.

So part of my job is actually to be a greenwash cop and let people know that, you know what,
these are the brands, they’re not as natural as they claim to be. . . . But that’s the thing —
consumers are getting smart, so products have to smarten up, too.

That’s why I think you’re seeing more products on shelves today that say that they’re paraben-
free, because Canadians said, um, I heard parabens are not good for me, should they really be in
my shampoo or whatnot?

And that just shows the power of the consumer. When we catch on to something, like a
preservative that we don’t want in a product, companies realize that if they want your business,
they’re going to have to shape up.

Q: What’s your advice for people who find it overwhelming to keep track of all these
ingredients?

A: On my new website, ecologic.ca, I have a printable wallet-sized guide to the Mean 15
ingredients to avoid. So that’s easy to keep on hand, and you can cross-check the ingredients list
on products to see whether they contain any of those.

The other thing is just to look for third-party seals because that tells you that someone else is
keeping their eye on this, someone else is monitoring the claim, someone else is visiting the
factories to make sure that they are actually as natural or organic as they claim to be.
So you can see some of those seals like Ecocert- and Natural Product Association-certified in drugstores now on some products and it’s definitely in health food stores.

But if a seal isn’t there, flip over the bottle and look at the ingredient list. You might not recognize all the ingredients, but at least make sure that the big baddies that you know, like the parabens, are not in there.

Q: Why is it so important for you to share what’s really in these products?

A: It’s one thing that we all have in common. We’re all washing with soap, we’re all brushing our teeth, we’re all getting dressed in the morning and three-quarters of Canadians are taking vitamins and supplements and whatnot, so this all brings us together and connects us.

And I think, if we can take a step back, and say, wow, OK, these products that we’re using every day are way more toxic than they should be — if they’re toxic, they really shouldn’t be on shelves, but the fact that they are on shelves, I just feel a responsibility to step up and say, OK, guys, I’ve done some research and I’ve figured a couple of things out and here’s what I’ve learned.

And hopefully this helps you navigate the minefield of products that we put on our bodies every day a little bit more easily.

Q: What do you suggest for people as an easy first step?

A: Look around your washroom, and whatever product you’re about to run out of, try using a natural version of that instead.

And then, the next time the next product runs out, try natural again. . . . Once you start trying them out, you’ll realize that, OK, Adria’s recommended a couple that really work and I can stick with this.

I can make the change and I can feel good about putting a product on me and on my family that’s not toxic, that I feel safe using in the house and that I don’t have to worry about polluting the water downstream, too.

Q: In terms of product regulations and Health Canada, where do we sit compared to the U.S and Europe?

A: Somewhere in the middle. Europe is so much further ahead of us in terms of body care/cosmetic regulations . . . They have banned over 1,300 chemicals from use in personal care products. Canada has only restricted about over 500 now. The U.S. (has) restricted so few chemicals: I think it’s like eight or something.

So we are better than U.S., but we’re much further behind than Europe. And I’m not shy to criticize the government and to lay on praise when it’s due. . . . As you’ll see in the book, I’ll give people the e-mail address and the phone number for our health minister and prime minister.
and say OK guys, let’s take a quick second and send an e-mail to your elected representatives and let them know that you want to see more of these toxins taken out of these products because it’s nice that we have cosmetic regulations but no one’s really enforcing them right now.

And we shouldn’t have to worry about carcinogens in our cosmetics. We shouldn’t have to worry about hormone disrupters in our baby care products and that’s something we have a right to demand from our politicians. There’s definitely room for improvement. . . . And I think, as you see in Ecoholic, it’s a mix of what’s wrong with the products, what’s the solution, here are the good ones, here are product rankings and reviews, and by the way, here’s the number and e-mail for the federal government in case you’re peeved about some of the stuff that’s still out there and want to let them know.

**Q: Are there any other messages that you want to get out there?**

**A:** I think that Canadians are on the right track. We’re starting to realize that there are too many toxins in our environment, there are too many toxins in the products that we buy and we just need to take that next step and get a few more of them out of our daily routines.

As attached as we are to the products that we use every day, there are some really good natural replacements that are really worth giving a shot.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

c kuntz@calgaryherald.com

© Copyright (c) The Calgary Herald