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Beauty sleep

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It is a seductive idea: You go to sleep, and your pillowcase (or mattress or comforter) goes to work, nourishing your skin and improving your appearance in ways a good night's rest can't quite muster.

Call it the ultimate beauty sleep.

Celebrities know all about it. Doris Day is said to have slept in Vaseline and Saran Wrap. Madonna slathers herself in high-priced face cream and wears a plastic body suit to bed, or so say the gossip sites.



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And now from the bedding industry, where some manufacturers hope to redefine the meaning of anti-wrinkle sheets, comes beauty bedding, a small but growing army of pillows, sheets, blankets, comforters and mattresses made from high-tech fabrics built to perform double duty. By day they labor as bed coverings. By night they dispense minute amounts of health and beauty aids through surface contact with the skin.

The bedding comes buttressed with additives -- and claims -- more common to cosmetics than comforters, like seaweed mattress ticking that purports to rejuvenate skin and aloe vera pillow covers and blankets that promise to soothe skin and moisturize. And depending on the manufacturer, copper-inflected pillowcases are designed to help reduce the appearance of facial wrinkles, fight bacteria, smite dust mites and even benefit sufferers of eczema and psoriasis.

Some dermatologists have raised questions about the efficacy of the products and their claims. "I think the idea of putting an active ingredient in clothes or bedding is interesting," said Dr. Leslie Baumann, the director of the University of Miami Cosmetic Medicine and Research Institute. "But the companies haven't usually done the studies that we expect to see to make their claims. To really know how these products work, we'd need to look at 30 people, 15 who sleep on the product and 15 who don't, all with the same complaint. But studies like that cost \$50,000 to \$100,000, and most companies would rather spend that money on marketing."

Another sticking point is the choice of ingredients used in the product. "It is important that they have been proven to work," Baumann said. "We know, for example, that aloe vera is good for sensitive skin and gets rid of redness. But with marine algae there is no data for what it claims to do."

Indeed, aloe vera is the bedding industry's go-to botanical ingredient, found in products like Natura World's latex-filled, wool-lined pillow with an aloe vera cotton cover (\$77) and Hollandia International's aloe kangaroo blanket (\$150), which claims to regulate moisture and neutralize irritation and has pouches to keep the hands and feet warm. Mattress makers from giants like Serta to boutique companies like Park Place Corp. in Greenville, S.C., sell mattresses with aloe vera ticking.

Unlike soy protein and sea algae, which are woven directly into the fabric, aloe vera is usually housed in microcapsules, which are bound tightly to the bedding fabric during the finishing process. "The microbeads release the aloe when they're crushed by the weight of your body," said Edwin Shoffner, the vice president of sales for Park Place, which uses aloe vera ticking on a high-end visco memory foam mattress, priced from \$1,499 for a queen set.

A similar technique is used in the ticking for the company's aromatherapy mattress, which releases a light lavender scent designed to promote relaxation. The fabrics deliver their benefits for at least five years, Shoffner said.

The amount of aloe released by the body's pressure is small, he said. It isn't greasy, he added, "but if you rub the back of your hand on the aloe vera ticking, you'll see a sheen."

But will it migrate through a mattress pad and sheet? Yes, if cotton percale sheets and a lightweight cotton mattress pad are used, said Eric Delaby, the sales vice president for Deslee Textiles, the Belgium-based company that manufactures the ticking. "You won't get the benefits with a vinyl mattress pad," he said.

Proponents also recommend sleeping in the nude to eliminate an additional barrier.

Generations of bedding makers have been captivated by the notion of bedclothes that act as beauty aids. The humble satin pillowcase, after all, is still sold to help keep hairdos in place.

But the current products owe their existence to the advent of nanotechnology, the high-tech science that makes it possible to break down ingredients like seaweed, aloe vera and copper into ultrafine particles that can be imbedded into woven fabrics. Though minuscule, nanoparticles "retain the properties of the ingredient and are

very durable," Delaby said. "They won't rub off, and you don't feel a film the way you did with products like fabric protectors before we were able to make the molecules smaller."

The supertiny particles also cover a larger surface area and release more ions than ordinary molecules, which makes the product effective, said Adrian Tooke, a founder of Copalife International, a company that unveiled its 300-thread-count cotton and copper-alloy beauty pillowcases, made by a patented process and sold online for \$40, last fall.

Copper-inflected pillowcases and sheets are, in fact, beauty bedding's new kid on the block. Last November, SkinGlow pillow covers and comforters made their debut at Bed, Bath & Beyond, priced at \$19.99 and \$249.99, respectively, and made from 300-count combed cotton and Cupron, a patented copper additive.

Yet copper bedding is already more controversial than aloe vera bedclothes ever were. The products offer a sexy promise: to reduce the appearance of wrinkles, crow's feet and fine lines in four to six weeks as well as combat bacteria, allergens and fungi. Doctors are lined up on both sides of the product.

Dr. Yael Halaas, a New York City plastic surgeon, is a fan. She began sleeping on a SkinGlow pillow cover last summer, when she received it from someone she knows at London Luxury, the company that makes the bedding. (She said she has no commercial ties with the company.) "I think it's fabulous for acne control," she said, adding that copper can be a natural antibiotic. "Copper sheets could be great for back acne." She also said the copper pillow cover may stimulate collagen production and possibly accelerate some tissue growth.

Halaas cited a double blind test of 57 participants commissioned by Cupron that showed "a statistically significant cosmetic effect" on the skin of the participants who slept on the Cupron copper pillowcase for four weeks as compared with those who slept on a placebo pillowcase. (The test results are posted at www.cupronsales.com/Cupron-Cosmetic-Trial-a/141.htm.) "As a physician, I find that interesting," she said. "I don't think a \$20 pillowcase is ever going to replace facial plastic surgery, but I think it will compete with facial creams."

But Baumann, who said she had not seen the copper products but is familiar with Cupron, is skeptical. "To make an aging claim, you have to be down to the dermas," she said. "We know copper peptide does this, but not regular copper. And even with copper peptide applied topically in high amounts, it's not very easy to get it to penetrate."

Just don't tell that to Pat Wright, a homemaker and mother in Malaga, Spain, who said she has slept on a Copalife pillowcase for several months. "It tingled a bit the first time I used it, but the crow's feet around my eyes aren't so strong and my neck looks less craggy," she said. "I haven't used another pillowcase since I got it."

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