

A Sensitive Issue?

Those of you who have ever tried the following experiment know that I am speaking the truth and nothing but the truth. Ask all ladies in a reasonably sized audience to stick up their hand and then to keep this hand up if they have sensitive skin. You will see that more than 50% of the ladies present, sometimes even more than 70%, will keep their hand up. Then repeat the same two questions for the gentlemen in your audience. The outcome for the second question will be a lot lower. You're lucky if you even get 10% of the males to admit that they have sensitive skin. This rather uncontrolled experiment tells us that females are suffering significantly more from sensitive skin than males do but that is something you probably already knew. As a cosmetic scientist, I am more interested in the reasons why than in the actual percentages, and it turns out that I am not the only one. At most cosmetic conferences you will be able to listen to presentations in which methods to objectively assess the occurrence of sensitive skin are discussed and compared to self-perception of skin sensitivity. Unfortunately, the bottom line of all these presentations is that we can hardly find any concrete physiological manifestations of sensitive skin. Minute differences can be found but you need really large panels to get this difference to be significant. Why is it

Measured vs Perceived

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that you need well over 500 people in a panel to be able to differentiate sensitive from non-sensitive skin using skin bioengineering methods whereas every single woman can tell you without any doubt in her mind whether she has sensitive skin or not? Like skin moisturization, is sensitive skin just another example of a mismatch between what can be objectively measured and subjectively perceived?

But I should be honest with you and not only tell you what helps me to make my point. What I conveniently forgot to mention is that you have to do your experiment in specific countries. A high incidence of female skin sensitivity is guaranteed in countries like Luxembourg, Switzerland, Japan, Denmark, Norway and the United States, etc. The answer is guaranteed to be different in countries like Mozambique and Ethiopia, Vietnam and Nepal, Haiti and Nicaragua. The major difference between these two groups of countries is their Gross National Product (GNP) per capita. Countries with a higher GNP per capita have a higher incidence of skin sensitivity, although my data is not extensive enough to support the statement that the greater the GNP per capita, the higher the incidence of female skin sensitivity. The data that Dr. Ota of Japan presented for some Asian countries at the 21st IFSCC Congress in Berlin¹ suggests that female skin sensitivity is evident but also reasonably constant above a certain threshold value of GNP per capita. But, as I said above, as a cosmetic scientist, I am more interested in the reasons for skin sensitivity than in its statistics.

Now here is my theory. First of all, people in countries with a higher GNP per capita can afford to spend money on things like soap, toothpaste and more luxurious forms of cosmetics. They apply a lot more products to their skin and this continuous challenge may result in impaired barrier function and as a consequence such people will have a higher incidence of sensitive skin. This could also explain why men have a lower incidence of sensitive skin compared to women. On a whole, men apply far less cosmetics to their skin than women do. The chemical insult on their skin is less and thus is their incidence of sensitive skin less. If you actually ask those men brave enough to publicly admit that they had sensitive skin, they will tell you that this particularly manifests itself on their face where they