

water proof

At a time when treatments for skin sensitivities come in concocted capsules and dubious ointments, the value of pure water is often pushed to the side. Here, we explore Avène thermal spring water and its unprecedented power to heal. **BY ELENA SCHMIDT**

IT IS A SUMMER DAY IN AVÈNE, IN SOUTHWESTERN FRANCE. Rain is cascading over the *Montagne Noire* (Black Mountain), its surrounding forest, and the massive rocks that border this quaint, circular village. Exhausted yet optimistic, young Olivia walks through the doors of Avène's Hydrotherapy Center (avenecenter.com) after a long flight from the US. As the raindrops seep into the ground, commencing their 50-year journey to the depths of the Earth and back to the surface of Sainte-Odile Spring, Olivia is greeted by a doctor—one who offers the kind of hope that sounds a bit like magic.

The medical team here has prescribed Olivia a 21-day plan to treat her painfully dry, cracked skin, the results of a rare genetic disorder called *Ichthyosis vulgaris*. Down the hall, baths are filling with water from the spring, untouched by humans. Patients come here to soak in its powerful mineral content, the likes of which exist nowhere else in the world. The majority of Avène's clientele is like Olivia and are here to heal. Some have lesions; others scales. There is work to be done throughout this place.

ON THE PATH

On its way to terra firma, Avène's rainwater mixes with sea spray—little particles of sea water and mostly mineral salts (calcium, magnesium, and sodium chloride). Its initial destination is the preserved grounds of Haut-Languedoc Park where the water filters underground. Its final destination: the Sainte-Odile Spring. The interim journey requires that the water filter slowly through the soil, where—according to Jacqueline



Flam Stokes, vice president of retail sales and marketing at Avène and Klorane in the US—the water absorbs beneficial carbonates and minerals. “The Avène Thermal Spring Water has an ideal low mineral composition with a great balance of calcium and magnesium,” says Stokes. “It helps keep the skin soothed and perfectly in check.”

As Avène's waters travel underground, free from human contamination, it forms an entirely new identity. Rainwater reaches massive dolomite rocks, where it follows the path of the rock's pores and stratification lines. The rainwater filters through the rock, absorbing the dolomite's signature micro

flora. At this point it is elementally one with this microflora, *Aqua.dolomiae*.

In a slow yet consistent way, the water takes two paths, through the dolomite rock deep underground or through the sub-soil near the surface. The water filtered through dolomite rock heats up and rises to where it merges with colder water hugging the surface. This warm-cold mashup forms the composition of Avène's Thermal Spring Water—one that offers hope to those who have all but given up on their battles with skin disease. It's Mother Nature's salve, a soothing, non-irritating, anti-inflammatory concoction. And according to Stokes, its

structure is 100-percent unique.

Our patient, Olivia, can rest assured. Centuries-old data proves the efficacy of this virtuous spring. Avène's first center opened in 1743. Doctors and scientists of the day wrote manuscripts citing its effective chemical properties and the water's ability to treat atopic dermatitis, eczema, psoriasis, and burns. In 1874, Avène's spring water gained official public recognition when the Academy of Medicine acknowledged its medicinal properties.

Today, Avène's Hydrotherapy Center treats up to 2,800 patients per year during "hydro-season"—generally April to October. Patients, along with dermatologists and journalists, visit the pristine facility to experience its treatments and reap its rewards. "Contrast Avène's countryside and medieval town with an advanced center and space-age production facility... then you may be able to wrap your arms around what is happening there," says dermatologist Joel Schlessinger of LovelySkin in Omaha, Nebraska.

WHAT A HEAL

According to the center's general manager, Marie-Ange Martincic, the majority of Avène patients are children who suffer from severe forms of eczema (atopic dermatitis).

Their skin is incessantly itchy, inflamed, and covered in red or dark patches that often serve as a source of pain and embarrassment. As a result, Martincic notes, these patients experience feelings of isolation.

Psoriasis patients mark the second largest population at the Center. The skin cells of psoriasis patients build up rapidly on the surface, where red patches and silvery scales form. If sensitive skin weren't enough to crave relief, psoriasis patients frequently suffer from arthritis.

Those arriving at Avène do so with the knowledge that the essential barrier of their skin has been compromised. Unlike "normal" skin, which defends against chemicals and pollution, sensitive skin falls prey to these irritants. The Center's treatments focus on adding much-needed moisture to dry dermis and strengthening the essential barrier that has been compromised.

"Avène's water not only moisturizes the skin, it also avoids harming the skin," says Schlessinger. He adds that while all water provides healing, it can be detrimental if contaminated by foreign chemicals. Avène's unadulterated water is distinct in its ability to work in tandem with sensitive skin. "Our water supply, particularly in the US, is so challenged with chemicals that enter into it

on a minute-by-minute basis, that this concept of untouched waters is absolutely foreign," he notes.

To avoid contamination, Avène's recently renovated center was strategically built to connect to the source of the Sainte-Odile Spring, ensuring that patients gain optimal and direct benefits. "It's as pure as you can get," says Stokes.

Patients all over the world are drawn to this distinction, and its mythology. After 21 days, many walk away changed. On the first day of treatment, fearful looks reflect the patients' suffering, says Martincic. "During their stay there is a physical and mental transformation that shines on their faces."

IT'S OFFICIAL

French patients receive full coverage from the French national health-care system, which recommends they return to Avène for three consecutive years to increase the likelihood of symptom remission or dramatically reduced flare-ups. "Olivia came to the center for three consecutive years, and the results were so convincing that her pediatrician decided to visit us to take a closer look," says Martincic.

Upon entrance, eczema and psoriasis patients receive standardized scores



(called SCORAD and PASI), indicating the severity of symptoms. At the end of three weeks, doctors expect that number will drop. The patient will follow up with a prescribed program, including four to five daily treatments that can include hydro-massage baths, showers, and full-body sprays; localized sprays; underwater massages; or thermal spring water compresses, according to Martincic.

After daily hydro-specific treatments, certain patients move on to supplemental treatments and general education classes. For instance, hydro-heliotherapy—controlled exposure to the sun alternated with Avène thermal-water spray therapy—works by slowing the turnover of cells and reducing scaling and inflammation.

Patients are also encouraged to complete training workshops, as well. Unlike most hydrotherapy centers—where treatment protocols start and end with water—Avène’s patients and their families take the invaluable opportunity to learn. They leave the center understanding their ailment, the causes of flare-ups, and the products to use without irritating the skin. They also learn protocols for hygiene, moisturization, and how to avoid habits such as scratching that can exacerbate the damage.



While Schlessinger notes medication is often necessary in treating skin disorders, side effects can be troublesome, especially when taken orally. “Topical steroids are relatively benign, but if overused they can cause significant and severe thinning of the skin and, at worse, cause a change in hormonal regulation of the patient.”

WATER WORKS

An observational study in 2005 recorded the scores from 6,180 patients—43.3 percent of whom had atopic dermatitis, 28.9 percent who had psoriasis. They found that atopic sufferers’ average score (based on the

standardized SCORAD scale) improved by 45 to 50 percent. Psoriasis patients’ PASI (Psoriasis Area Severity Index) score improved by 59 to 62 percent. “We met several patients and saw remarkable examples of transformation,” says Schlessinger.

Long-term results are notable. Out of 249 atopic patients assessed nine months after treatment, most continued to improve, and a 50 percent reduction in corticosteroid use was reported. “This approach is unique because it focuses less on medications and more on the waters,” says Schlessinger.

“Here,” says an optimistic Martincic, “they find hope.”●

AVÈNE INNOVATIONS

The chance to experience remission in this natural way comes at a price, though the relief experienced by Avène’s patients is well worth the cost. Costs range from \$18 for a simple bath to \$800 for a multi-course treatment. For those of us with restricted finances and schedules, Stokes and Schlessinger recommend the next best thing: Avène’s products, which allow the Center’s reach to extend throughout the world. Hundreds of beauty stores and pharmacies in the US carry its products.

Avène also offers a revolutionary new claim. Since defining the water’s unique double signature—a wealth of beneficial minerals, along with its biological footprint (*Aqua.dolomiaie* microflora)—scientists began pulling molecules apart to test the water’s components. “This microflora does not exist anywhere else in the world,” says Philippe Lebaron, director of oceanological observatory at Banyuls-sur-Mer in France.

In 2001, scientists identified the *Aqua.Dolomiaie* microorganism that partly provides the anti-itch and anti-inflammatory benefits of Avène Thermal Spring Water. After 12 years of research, the most effective fractions of *Aqua.Dolomiaie* were selected to become a new active I-modulia, which was then industrially produced and integrated into Avène’s new XeraCalm A.D. line. This line meets the needs of very dry skin that is prone to itching, atopic dermatitis, or eczema. “For the first time, we are able to take an active natural substance and industrially produce it on large scale,” says Stokes.

The line of products promises to reduce itching by 84 percent, increase hydration, and quell inflammation by inhibiting the receptor that activates these sensations. For those suffering from skin that refuses function properly, there is great proof in Avène’s results.