

Not In My Cosmetics: Hazardous Ingredients To Avoid

Margaret Pitcher
GratefulBody.com

As consumers we have become increasingly aware of what we eat, carefully checking labels and avoiding ingredients that could be harmful to our health. But even conscientious consumers might not know the hazards found in cosmetics. Women are especially susceptible to the \$35 billion cosmetics industry, which encompasses a wide range of products including make-up, perfume, deodorant, toothpaste, lotions, moisturizers, soaps, shampoos, conditioners, shower gels and sunscreen. Even if you don't use make-up or perfume and utilize a minimal regimen, you could still be unwittingly absorbing toxins. Those of us who use only "green" products might think we're steering clear of harmful ingredients, but many brands marketed as "natural" or "organic" contain dangerous chemicals and synthetics. Following are important facts about the skin care industry, along with a list of ingredients that can be found in the top "green" brands. Common sense tells us that clearly these ingredients have no place in our skin, our bodies and, consequently, our environment.

The Surprising Truth About the Skin "Care" Industry

In the U.S., the cosmetics industry is not regulated for consumer safety. The government does not require health studies or pre-market testing for these products before they are sold. According to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA): "Cosmetic products and ingredients are not subject to FDA premarket approval authority... Cosmetic firms are responsible for substantiating the safety of their products and ingredients."

The Environmental Working Group (EWG), a non-profit public interest organization specializing in environmental investigations, estimates that **89% percent of the 10,500 documented ingredients used in personal care products have not been assessed for safety**. The remaining 11% have been assessed by the Cosmetics Industry Review (CIR), the industry's self-regulated safety panel. This panel was established and is funded by the Cosmetic, Toiletry, and Fragrance Association. Current facts and statistics bring their safety assessment process into question.

EWG analysis has concluded that **more than one-third of all personal care products contains at least one ingredient linked to cancer, and that 79% of all products contain ingredients that may contain harmful impurities such as known human carcinogens**. While the cosmetics industry and others might argue that simply using deodorant or lotion will not give you cancer, even in small amounts the exposure to these chemicals adds up over time. The Campaign for Safe Cosmetics estimates that on any given day a consumer may use as many as 25 different cosmetic and personal care products containing more than 200 different chemical compounds. In 2004 the European Union, through its European Chemicals Bureau, placed a ban on more than 1000 chemicals and synthetics in skin and body care products. Clearly the U.S. is lagging in this respect.

Contrary to what many people believe, cosmetic ingredients do not merely sit on our skin's surface: they penetrate the skin and often end up stored in our tissues. Our skin eats, digests and eliminates. Eventually these ingredients wash down our drains and into the water table. It's a lose-lose situation for our health and our planet.

Are Your "Natural" Skin Care Products Really Natural?

You'd be surprised how many hazardous ingredients are used in products labeled and marketed as "natural" or "organic." Unlike food, cosmetics are not required to meet organic standards. Products including organically grown ingredients can be labeled "organic," even they also contain hazardous chemicals and synthetics.

How does your "natural" or "organic" product measure up? Check the ingredients lists for these harmful synthetics, which are known to pose significant health hazards and which are included in a number of natural and organic skin care products.

Alpha Hydroxy Acids (AHAs)

AHAs (as well as Beta Hydroxy Acids, or BHAs) were initially used in "skin peel" products and are currently included in moisturizers and sunscreens. Manufacturers would have you believe that AHAs are safe and gentle, and give your skin a youthful appearance by "exfoliating" the skin (read: strip away the upper layers of the skin). However the FDA has issued warnings on the dangers of AHAs and BHAs as far back as 1992, more currently warning of their potential to increase the risk of sunburn and skin cancer by intensifying UV exposures in deep skin layers. Despite FDA warnings, AHAs and BHAs have still not been assessed for safety by CIR and are widely used in personal care products. Common AHAs include glycolic acid, lactic acid and citric acid; salicylic acid is a commonly used BHA.

Benzyl Alcohol

This petrochemical substance is being used as a preservative in skin care, often replacing the parabens (see below). It also used as a solvent in inks, paints and lacquers. Benzyl alcohol is harmful if inhaled or swallowed and can cause itching, burning, scaling, hives and blistering of skin. It's also a suspected neurotoxin and gastrointestinal/liver toxicant and, through its excretion and disposal, believed to pose risks to wildlife and the environment by contaminating our water, air and soil.

Diazolidinyl Urea, Imidazolidinyl Urea

These synthetic preservatives often contain formaldehyde, which is a known human carcinogen. They're also potentially contaminated with other chemicals linked to cancer and significant health problems. Like benzyl alcohol, these substances are skin sensitizers that can cause itching, burning, scaling, hives and blistering, and suspected neurotoxins and gastrointestinal/liver toxicants. The American Academy of Dermatology has determined these chemicals are a primary cause of contact dermatitis.

Diethanolamine (DEA) and Triethanolamine (TEA)

DEA and TEA are ammonia compounds used as foaming agents. They are toxic for our respiratory and immune systems and can instigate asthma attacks or other problems with our lungs and airways. EWG indicates that TEA is a cancer hazard, and DEA a likely carcinogen: these amines can form cancer-causing nitrosamines if mixed with nitrates. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) placed workplace exposure limits on DEA. In 2006 a nutritionist at the University of North Carolina found in lab research that DEA slowed the creation of brain cells vital to memory, and consequently issued a warning to pregnant women to check their product labels. The Cosmetic, Toiletry, and Fragrance Association countered his findings, claiming that exposure via cosmetics is far lower than in the research. In fact, it has been shown that harmful ingredients used regularly accumulate in our tissues and have negative effects on our health.

Fragrance

Any ingredient labeled "fragrance" can mask literally hundreds of chemicals, including phthalates, chemical compounds that are mainly used as plasticizers. Various studies in Europe, Japan and the U.S. have shown that exposure to phthalates damages the liver, kidneys, lungs and developing testes, causes or aggravates allergies in children, and mimics the female hormone oestrogen which can lead to a broad range of birth defects and lifelong reproductive impairments. Manufacturers are not required to disclose the chemicals used in fragrances, so regardless of whether phthalates are present, in cosmetics the term is a catch-all for large quantities of potential toxins.

Glycerin (Non-Vegetable)

Unless a product specifies "vegetable glycerin," it is a petroleum-derived synthetic. In skin care, glycerin is used as an emollient, humectant, solvent and lubricant. It has not been assessed for safety by CIR. However, as with DEA, OSHA has placed workplace exposure limits on this chemical. Even in small levels, which build up over time and use, such a potentially hazardous industrial substance has no place in skin and body care products.

Parabens (Methyl, Propyl, Butyl and Ethyl)

Even though the toxicity of these synthetic preservatives is well known and has received a lot of attention amongst advocacy organizations and in the media, they are still widely used in skin care and other personal products. Though CIR deems parabens "safe" it also qualifies them as "hormonally active," and the EPA classifies parabens as hormone-disrupters, i.e. estrogenic synthetics that disrupt normal hormone function. According to Breast Cancer Action, estrogenic chemicals mimic the function of the naturally occurring hormone estrogen, and exposure to external estrogens has been shown to increase the risk of breast cancer. Parabens are also a potential concern for impaired fertility or development and increased risks for other cancers.

Phenoxyethanol

This synthetic ether alcohol preservative is another paraben replacement, and like benzyl alcohol it has industrial uses (as a solvent for dyes and inks, as well as an insect repellent) and is harmful if inhaled or swallowed. Phenoxyethanol is also a potential reproductive or developmental toxin. Various Material Safety Data Sheets (forms that provide workers with information on the hazards of specific chemicals) warn that this chemical is a severe eye and skin irritant; toxic to kidneys, the nervous system and liver; can cause reproductive defects; and, with repeated or prolonged exposure, can produce organ damage and lead to chronic respiratory irritation.

Polysorbate 20

This synthetic isolate is an emulsifier (binds oil and water) derived from corn. Despite its plant-derived origin, the industrial process used to generate this substance causes it to be potentially contaminated with chemicals linked to cancer and other significant health problems, and it is also a suspected gastrointestinal/liver and cardiovascular/blood toxicant. Polysorbate 20 is used in many skin care products despite the fact that it's a skin sensitizer that can cause itching, burning, scaling, hives and blistering of skin.

Sodium Lauryl/Laureth Sulfate

This cheap synthetic detergent is derived from petroleum or coconut oil. Don't be fooled by the phrase "comes from coconuts": regardless of its origin, sodium lauryl or laureth sulfate (and any ingredient with "lauryl" or "laureth") removes necessary oils from the skin, causes skin irritation and acne, eczema and psoriasis, can damage the immune system, and causes eye irritation. SLS is known to be contaminated with 1,4-Dioxane, a petrochemical that the EPA considers a probable carcinogen. The federal Consumer Product Safety Commission

reports that "the presence of 1,4-Dioxane, even as a trace contaminant, is cause for concern"; according to the Campaign For Safe Cosmetics, this may be in products that contain "-eth-" or "PEG" in the ingredient name.

Before You Throw in the Towel...

It can be frustrating trying to find genuinely natural, clean and safe skin care. But alternatives do exist. Some skin care companies understand and respect the laws of nature and utilize Mother Earth's resources to nourish our skin to optimal health, not manipulate it superficially with chemicals. This is real skin care - not only truly pure and safe, but also far more effective and beneficial than highly-processed "plant-based" ingredients, or compounds identified in plants but synthesized in a laboratory.

Any extract can be a synthetic mimic; in other words, something other than the plant it's extracted from. As with sodium lauryl sulfate and polysorbate 20, the industrial process used to generate "natural" ingredients de-vitalizes the substance *and* contaminates it with dangerous toxins. Ironically, these fragmented materials must be eliminated by the skin, which further taxes and aggravates the skin, our largest organ. Plant material untouched by industrial processing is what we refer to as "biologically appropriate ingredients," substances that our bodies can fully and efficiently use. It is more costly to produce truly natural products. But when you consider the long-term health and environmental costs of using cheap industrial fillers and synthetics, that's a bad deal for everyone.

EWG's "Skin Deep" is a personal care product safety guide and great resource for information about the products we use on our skin and bodies. It's an electronic database with detailed information on nearly 15,000 products - including cleansers, lotions, shampoos, lip balm, deodorant, toothpaste and sunscreen - and the more than 7,000 ingredients these products are formulated from. EWG cross-checks their database with 37 different toxicity and regulatory databases including those of the FDA, EPA, National Library of Medicine and European Chemicals Bureau. You can search by product type or brand, you can look up information on specific ingredients, and you can view a list of the highest concern and the lowest concern brands. For more information visit ewg.org/skindeep.

Also visit the Campaign For Safe Cosmetics website for current information about chemicals and our health: safecosmetics.org.

The real secret to a radiant and healthy complexion is simple: nourish your skin and feed it well. Choose the products you apply on your skin just as carefully as you would the food you put in your mouth.

© 2007 GratefulBody, Inc.

Margaret Pitcher is webmistress and outreach coordinator for GratefulBody, a Berkeley, CA-based manufacturer and distributor of safe, pure and effective skin care and botanical medicinals. Their chemical- and synthetic-free products harness the power of fresh, vital plants, and are formulated from organic, biodynamically grown and ethically wildcrafted ingredients. To learn more about GratefulBody, please visit their website at GratefulBody.com.

Reprint Permission: This article, including the copyright and author information, may be reprinted in its complete and unaltered form with the author's and company's prior written permission.