
The Story of Cosmetics: Frequently Asked Questions



Carcinogens in baby shampoo?

It's true! Dozens of children's bath products analyzed at an independent laboratory in 2009 were found to contain formaldehyde and 1,4 dioxane, two chemicals that cause cancer in lab animals and are classified as probable human carcinogens. Popular brands containing these chemicals include Johnson's Baby Shampoo, Sesame Street Bubble Bath and Huggies Naturally Refreshing Cucumber & Green Tea Baby Wash. The companies argue that each product contains just low levels of these toxins – but there shouldn't be any carcinogens in baby shampoo at all. Period.

The good news is, many companies have already figured out how to make excellent products without the toxic chemicals. To learn more check out: <http://www.safecosmetics.org/toxictub>



What's pinkwashing?

Pinkwashing is a term used to describe the activities of companies and groups that position themselves as leaders in the struggle to eradicate breast cancer (often labeling products with the iconic pink ribbon) while engaging in practices that may be contributing to rising rates of the disease. Not cool!

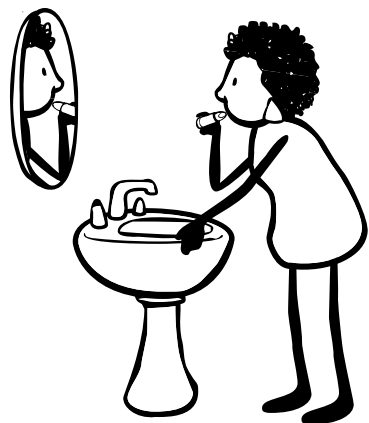
Despite their reputation as champions for women's health—burnished by their high-profile breast cancer charity events—Estee Lauder, Revlon and Avon could all be called pinkwashers! Indeed, all three companies continue to use chemicals linked to cancer and other chemicals linked to harm. These "pink-ribbon leaders" manufacture dozens of products each that rank an 8 or higher on the Skin Deep database's toxicity scale (10 is the worst)—including products that contain carcinogens and hormone-disrupting chemicals linked to increased cancer risk.

For more about the not-so-cute history of the pink ribbon (which was co-opted by a beauty magazine) and Breast Cancer Awareness Month (which was started by a pharmaceutical/chemical company), see Chapter 6 of the book "Not Just a Pretty Face: The Ugly Side of the Beauty Industry" by Stacy Malkan. www.notjustaprettyface.org

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But isn't it better living?

In the 1950s government subsidies helped companies figure out how to process oil byproducts into synthetic chemicals and resins to make all sorts of wonder (what's-in-it) products from plastics to make-up. Billions of tons of synthetic substances that never existed in nature before were released into the environment with little understanding of their impacts on people, wildlife and the ecosystem. Now, every baby on Earth is contaminated with man-made toxins before they are even born. Mountains of scientific



evidence implicate chemical exposures in modern-day health afflictions such as breast cancer, testicular cancer, childhood cancers, learning disabilities, autism, asthma, infertility, birth defects, Attention Deficit Disorder and other diseases that have been rising in recent decades. That doesn't exactly sound like better living, now does it?

But there is a better way! Green chemistry is the science of figuring out how to design products and processes in ways that minimize or eliminate hazardous substances. In the 21st century, all chemistry should be green chemistry. <http://www.beyondbenign.org/>

But it's just a little bit, right?

The companies argue that each product contains only low levels of toxic chemicals – it's just a little carcinogen in the baby shampoo, and a little more in the bubble bath, body wash, diaper cream, toys, food, water, air ... yikes! If this sounds a little crazy, that's because it is. There are a few things wrong with the industry's "low toxic doses are OK" argument. First, low doses are adding up; the average woman is exposed to over a hundred cosmetic chemicals a day, and many of these toxic exposures have similar mechanisms of action in the body (i.e., dozens of chemicals that act like estrogen). Secondly, low doses do matter: even the tiniest amounts of some substances can cause harm (think lead paint chips); and some chemicals are more problematic at lower doses than higher ones. For example, small doses of hormone-disrupting chemicals basically act like a key in a lock, turning hormone signals on and off – yes, the same signals that direct important bodily functions such as reproductive capacity. Third, chemical risk assessments typically study just one chemical at a time, rather than considering the potential for enhanced toxicity of chemical mixtures – even though evidence suggests that some chemicals can exponentially increase each other's health impacts, <http://safecosmetics.org/article.php?id=295>.

The bottom line: companies are not studying the long-term health impacts of repeated exposures to the chemical mixtures typically found in cosmetics – in other words, they have no idea about the real health risks of these products.

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What about salon workers?

Despite the fact that workers in nail salons are constantly exposed to hazardous cosmetic chemicals, there is shockingly little health research available about the health impacts on this population. We shouldn't be surprised, though, since cosmetic companies are not required to monitor the health effects of highly exposed worker populations, and the government isn't conducting this research either. What we do know is cause for concern: Nail salon workers are exposed to many problematic chemicals such as phthalates, toluene, formaldehyde, acetone, methylacrylates and more. These exposures often occur in poorly ventilated spaces to a workforce comprised mainly of women of childbearing age, who are especially vulnerable to toxic exposures. Occupational health research suggests adverse effects on attention, information processing and increased occupational asthma. See WVE report, "Glossed Over: Health Hazards Associated with Toxic Exposure in Nail Salons," <http://www.womenandenvironment.org/newsreports/issuereports/WVE.NailSalon.Report.pdf>

Hair salon environments are also a health concern. An increasing number of studies of humans link long-time hair dye use with cancer, including bladder cancer, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, and multiple myeloma. See http://www.cosmeticsdatabase.com/research/coal_tar_hair_dye.php; <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19092492?dopt=AbstractPlus> and <http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn13533-hair-dye-may-raise-cancer-risk-for-coiffeurs.html>

How do I find safer products?

It's confusing out there in the unregulated marketplace where consumers don't have a right to know everything that is in products we use on our bodies and even 'natural' personal care products can be full of toxic chemicals. That's why it's important to pass laws that require companies to be transparent and responsible. The most important thing you can do right now to protect yourself and your family from toxic personal care products is to get involved in the mobilization to pass the Safe Cosmetics Act of 2010: www.safecosmetics.org/takeaction.

Next, here are some ways you can reduce toxic exposures in your home:

- Simplify: use less stuff less often, and choose products with shorter ingredient lists and fewer hazardous synthetic chemicals (do you really need to spray "air freshener" around the house or sit in a tub full of toxic suds?) Want more tips? visit www.safecosmetics.org/takeaction
- Just say No to Fragrance: It's best to avoid the mystery concoction known as "fragrance," made from a dozen or more secret chemicals. Everything has a fragrance these days, from make-up, to candles and even clothes. Check labels carefully; even "fragrance free" products may contain fragrance chemicals to cover up the odor of other chemicals.

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- Read labels: Thankfully there are great resources online to help consumers make sense of confusing product labels. One of the best is the Environmental Working Group's Skin Deep database at www.cosmeticsdatabase.org, which ranks products for toxicity on a scale of 1-10.

Look for Products that are Safe and Sustainable: Besides screening products for toxicity concerns, look for products that are made in ways that are sustainable and support fair trade.

For example, choose products that source organic ingredients, especially USDA Organic products (these ingredients are renewable, don't come from oil, and they weren't produced using pesticides and conventional agricultural practices, learn more here: <http://organicconsumers.org/bodycare/index.cfm>). You can also look for products that use fair trade certified ingredients (the folks producing ingredients get a fair price for their products, <http://www.greenamericatoday.org/programs/fairtrade>). And just because it's from a natural source, doesn't guarantee it's sustainable. For example, the last habitat of the orangutan in Indonesia is being destroyed to plant conventional palm oil plantations to supply cosmetics – not such a good thing! Learn more: <http://ran.org/content/problem-palm-oil>

Shouldn't there be a law against this?

We need federal legislation that protects consumers, workers and the environment, and shifts the cosmetics industry to safer chemicals and products.

For the first time in more than 70 years, the U.S. Congress is considering legislation that will shift the beauty industry away from hazardous chemicals. This is a really big, exciting step in the right direction! Current law – the Food, Drug and Cosmetics Act of 1938 – allows the cosmetics industry to make its own decisions about what's safe, with very little government oversight.

FDA cannot require companies to ensure cosmetics ingredients have been assessed for safety, can't require full product labeling and can't even require product recalls. It's time to bring the laws into the 21st century.

The Safe Cosmetics Act of 2010, to be introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives this summer, will require manufacturers to be fully transparent about what's in personal care products, and will set up a fair system to assess the safety of cosmetic ingredients and phase out the most harmful substances.

Not everybody is as excited about this. The big cosmetics companies have already spent millions trying to defeat this effort – before the bill has even been introduced! It will take a major mobilization of women, parents, workers and everyone who is affected by this problem (all of us!) from across the political spectrum to pass this landmark legislation. Take action at www.safecosmetics.org/takeaction.