
The Story of Cosmetics: Personal Care Product Myths and Facts



Myth: If products are for sale at a supermarket, drugstore, or department store cosmetics counter, they must be safe.

Fact: The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has no authority to require companies to assess ingredients or products for safety. FDA does not review or approve the vast majority of cosmetic products or ingredients before they go on the market. The agency conducts pre-market reviews only for certain color additives and active ingredients in cosmetics classified as over-the-counter drugs.^{1,2}

Myth: The cosmetics industry effectively polices itself, making sure all ingredients meet a strict standard of safety.

Fact: In its more than 30-year history, the industry's safety panel (the Cosmetic Ingredient Review, or CIR) has assessed fewer than 20 percent of cosmetics ingredients and found only a handful of ingredients or chemical groups to be unsafe.^{3,4} Its recommendations are not binding on companies.⁵



Myth: The government prohibits dangerous chemicals in personal care products, and companies wouldn't risk using them.

Fact: Cosmetics companies may use any ingredient or raw material, except for color additives and a few prohibited substances (such as vinyl chloride and cow parts), without government review or approval.^{1,6}

- More than 500 products sold in the U.S. contain ingredients banned in cosmetics in Japan, Canada or the European Union.⁷
- Nearly 100 products contain ingredients considered unsafe by the International Fragrance Association.⁸
- A wide range of nanomaterials whose safety is in question may be common in personal care products.⁹
- 22% of all personal care products may be contaminated with the cancer-causing impurity 1,4-dioxane, including many children's products.^{10,11}
- 60% of sunscreens contain the potential hormone disruptor oxybenzone that readily penetrates the skin and contaminates the bodies of 97% of Americans.^{12,13}
- 61% of tested lipstick brands contain residues of lead.¹⁴

Myth: Cosmetic ingredients are applied to the skin and rarely get into the body. When they do, levels are too low to matter.

Fact: People are exposed by breathing in sprays and powders, swallowing chemicals

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on the lips or hands or absorbing them through the skin. Studies find evidence of health risks. Biomonitoring studies have found cosmetics ingredients – like phthalate plasticizers, paraben preservatives, the pesticide triclosan, synthetic musks, and sunscreens – inside the bodily fluids of men, women, children and even the cord blood of newborn babies.¹⁵⁻²² Many of these chemicals are potential hormone disruptors that may increase cancer risk.²³⁻²⁶ Products commonly contain penetration enhancers to drive ingredients deeper into the skin. Studies find health problems in people exposed to common fragrance and sunscreen ingredients, including elevated risk for sperm damage, feminization of the male reproductive system, and low birth weight in girls.²⁷⁻³⁰

Myth: Products made for children or bearing claims like “hypoallergenic” are safer choices.

Fact: Most cosmetic marketing claims are unregulated, and companies are rarely if ever required to back them up, even for children’s products. A company can use a claim like “hypoallergenic” or “natural” “to mean anything or nothing at all,” and while “[m]ost of the terms have considerable market value in promoting cosmetic products to consumers,... dermatologists say they have very little medical meaning.”³¹ An investigation of more than 1,700 children’s body care products found that 81 percent of those marked “gentle” or “hypoallergenic” contained allergens or skin and eye irritants.³²

Myth: FDA would promptly recall any product that injures people.

Fact: FDA has no authority to require recalls of harmful cosmetics.¹ Furthermore, manufacturers are not required to report cosmetics-related injuries to the agency. FDA relies on companies to report injuries voluntarily.¹

Myth: Consumers can read ingredient labels and avoid products with hazardous chemicals.

Fact: Federal law allows companies to leave many chemicals off labels, including nanomaterials, contaminants, and components of fragrance.²⁵ Fragrance may include any of 3,163 different chemicals,³³ none of which are required to be listed on labels. Fragrance tests reveal an average of 14 hidden compounds per formulation, including potential hormone disruptors and diethyl phthalate, a compound linked to sperm damage.³⁴

Myth: Cosmetics safety is a concern for women only.

Fact: Surveys show that on average, women use 12 products containing 168 ingredients every day, men use 6 products with 85 ingredients,³⁵ and children are exposed to an average of 61 ingredients daily.²⁴ The large majority of these chemicals have not been assessed for safety by the industry-funded CIR safety panel.^{3,4}

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