Toxic Beauty, the Ugly Truth Behind Beauty Products
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Most people recognize beauty in the signs of health: glowing skin, glossy full hair, a vibrant gleam in the eye. The whole point of cosmetic products such as moisturizer, mascara, facial cleanser, nail polish, lip stick, shampoo, styling gels, etc. is to enhance the beauty that is already there. What if these products were robbing you of health? Could they still be considered ‘beauty products’? What if you knew that these enhancements could injure your health or the health of your unborn children?

Cosmetic products are applied to the skin. Skin is the largest organ of the body and, along with the kidneys, liver, large colon, and lungs, the skin helps to detoxify our bodies of metabolic waste products and chemicals. The skin is also capable of absorbing toxins. Therefore, choosing what you put on your body is just as important as what you eat or how much you exercise.

A 2008 study of by the Environmental Working Group\(^1\) showed that carcinogens and hormone disrupting chemicals (parabens, phthalates, triclosan, musk) found in beauty products commonly used by teenagers were found in blood and urine samples all 20 teenage girls tested. (Teen Girls Body Burden of Hormone-Altering Cosmetic Chemicals\(^2\)). This was the first example of finding parabens in teenagers. Given that teenager’s bodies are undergoing major hormone changes, this finding is very disturbing as small shifts in the hormone system can result in very large changes. It is important to know that seemingly simple applications of antibacterial soap, hair gel, or nail polish may have long lasting health effects such as hormone related diseases or breast cancer.

Two generations ago, the drug diethylstilbestrol (DES) was given to pregnant women to prevent miscarriages. This hormone disruptor was later implicated in causing cervical cancer and the reproductive ability of their female children and female grandchildren. Although this drug is no longer in use, we don’t know how the multitude of other chemicals we now willingly expose ourselves to today will affect us in two, five, or 25 years in the future, nor do we know how it will affect our unborn children. Luckily, there are researchers looking into this and providing us with some answers. Right now, however, you can protect yourself by being aware that beauty products can be dangerous and knowing how to avoid known toxins. This article will highlight some toxic ingredients and provide resources to help you navigate the complex list of ingredients in many over the counter cosmetics.
Top 5 ingredients to avoid

1. **Parabens.** Parabens such as ethyl-, methyl-, butyl-, or propylparaben, are used as preservatives in many products such as shampoos, moisturizers, soaps, exfoliants, cleansers, and deodorants. They are excellent preservatives, but this class of chemicals are endocrine disruptors. Endocrine disruptors are chemicals that mimic your own hormones. Parabens mimic estrogen and have been found in breast cancer tumors.³ Although a direct link between parabens and cancer has not been proven, it is probably a good idea to avoid these chemicals until proven harmless.

2. **Phthalates.** Numerous news stories about the toxicity of Bisphenol A, a toxic plasticizer contaminant in drinking water bottles and canned food liners, has increased consumer awareness about phthalates. Unfortunately, the cosmetic industry uses phthalates in hair spray, nail polish and numerous other products. Phthalates have been shown to negatively affect genital development in baby boys and reduce testosterone levels in males in general.⁴,⁵

3. **Triclosan.** This antimicrobial product is found in antibacterial soap, detergent, toothpaste, fabric, facial tissue and even toys. It affects endocrine systems⁶ and thyroid metabolism. Unfortunately, many of us already carry a body burden of this chemical as revealed from random urine samples.⁷

4. **1,4 Dioxane.** According to the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease registry (ATSDR dioxane profile⁸) dioxane is a probable human carcinogen and can be found in shampoo, cosmetics, and detergents. Dioxane is a manufacturing by-product of ethoxylation process to make chemical less harsh. Although it will not be listed on the label, this readily absorbed carcinogen has been detected in common personal care products containing PEG, polyethylene, polyethylene glycol, polyoxyethylene, sodium laureth sulfate, and polysorbate. It is interesting to note that many of these contaminated ingredients are also ingredients found in nutritional supplements.

5. **Nail polish.** The big bad three ingredients in nail polish include formaldehyde, toluene, and dibutyl phthalate. These three items have been removed from numerous brands thanks to the Campaign for Safe cosmetics (www.safecosmetics.org). These ingredients disrupt the endocrine system, nervous system, and immune system.
Some important points about personal care and cosmetic products:

- The cosmetic industry is self regulated; don’t rely on the FDA to protect you from this $50 billion dollar industry or trust the industry will look out for your health. Although the cosmetic industry is forced to provide less toxic ingredients in European markets, they have not provided those cleaner products to Americans.
- Don’t just look at packaging: read labels and get to know a few toxic ingredients. Green marketing is ‘in’. Companies know this and make products look ‘green’ by listing natural ingredients on the label, creating beautiful package designs, and naming products after natural substances. Don’t be deceived, read your labels.
- Even small amounts of toxic ingredients can have significant negative impacts on health. Interestingly, smaller concentrations of toxic ingredients can sometimes have greater toxic effects than larger concentrations of the same ingredient.
- Endocrine disruptors can affect any stage of life: developing fetuses, children, teenagers, and adults. The longer we are exposed to these chemicals, the increased risk of hormone disruption.

Resources available

- Skin Deep, the Cosmetic Safety Data Base provides an amazing resource to look up specific personal care products and ingredients. This database was developed by the Environmental Working Group (www.ewg.org), a non profit dedicated to informing the public about a variety of topics. This resource will helps you navigate the complexity of products and toxic ingredients.
- Safety Guide to Children’s Personal Care Products This easy to use guide helps you avoid toxins in your children’s products. Another great gift from the Environmental Working Group.
- Campaign for Safe Cosmetics can give you more information about individual types of dangers in cosmetics.
- Nail Polish Wallet Card This great handout can guide you and your children in purchasing less toxic nail polish.
- The Boise Co-op Health and Beauty department has many non toxic, organic personal care products to choose from.
References

11. http://www.safecosmetics.org/