

Title: *If it is on the shelf it must be safe, right?*

By Brenda M. Afzal, RN, MS

Take a step back in time to this morning to when you started to prepare for the day ahead. You probably headed to the shower, maybe washed your hair, put on a little make-up or slathered your skin in moisturizer, used deodorant, hair products, perfume or cologne? If you're like me, you used many of these products and may have unwittingly exposed yourself to hundreds of chemicals, many of them linked to cancer, birth defects and other health concerns. A recent publication of The Breast Cancer Fund (Gray, 2008) discussed a body of scientific evidence that demonstrates a relationship between the pervasive chemical exposures in our lives and the incidence of breast cancer.

According to industry estimates, on any given day a consumer (both men and women) may use as many as 25 different cosmetic products containing more than 200 different chemical compounds (Toxic Free Legacy, 2008) The vast majority of the 10,500 ingredients used in our personal care products have not been screened for safety by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) or any other publicly accountable institution because contrary to what we would like to believe, the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act does not require cosmetic companies to do safety testing of their cosmetic products before marketing. Unlike the government's rigorous review of drugs prior to being brought to market, there is no governmental or independent scientific oversight of the ingredients in cosmetics as they are brought to market. Instead, the safety review for cosmetics is provided by the Cosmetic Ingredient Review Panel of the Cosmetic, Toiletry, and Fragrance Association - the trade association representing the very companies that manufacture cosmetics.

How can you be better informed about the products you use? The Campaign for Safe Cosmetics is a coalition of women's, public health, labor, environmental health, and consumer-rights groups that are working to protect the health of

consumers and workers by requiring the health and beauty industries to phase out the use of chemicals linked to cancer, birth defects and other health problems, and replace them with safer alternatives. They have asked cosmetics and personal care products companies to sign the *Compact for Safe Cosmetics*, a pledge to remove toxic chemicals and replace them with safer alternatives in every market they serve. As of June 2008, almost 1000 companies had signed the Compact. The next time you are about to purchase a new cosmetic or personal care product, check to see if the manufacturer has signed the Compact. If they have not, send them a message telling them you want them to make a commitment to remove toxic chemicals from their products and provide safer alternatives. Then search for a less toxic alternative.

How can you find a safer alternative? In 2004, the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics' founding partner, the Environmental Working Group, launched a searchable database called "Skin Deep" to help educate consumers. This is the only aggregated source of information on cosmetic safety available to the public. It inventories more than 14,000 products. In addition to the Skin Deep website, the National Library of Medicine has some information on personal care products on its Household Products site:

<http://householdproducts.nlm.nih.gov/products.htm>.

Stacy Malkan, author and environmental advocate has written a book, titled *Not Just a Pretty Face: the Ugly side of the Beauty Industry*. In her book she chronicles the history of the cosmetic industry, the impotent response of the government, and provides important information about the hidden toxins in our personal care products. It is a must read for all women, young and mature, who would like to better understand the issue of cosmetic safety.

What are some of the ingredients you should be concerned about?

- ❖ **Mercury**, (often listed as thimerosal on ingredient labels) found in some eye drops, ointment and deodorants
- ❖ **Lead acetate**, found in some hair dyes and cleanser
- ❖ **Formaldehyde and toluene**, found in nail products
- ❖ **Petrochemicals**, found in some hair relaxers, shampoos, mascara, perfume, foundation, lipstick and lip balm
- ❖ **Coal tar**, found in dandruff shampoos, anti-itch creams and hair dyes
- ❖ **Placenta**, found in some hair relaxers, moisturizers and toners
- ❖ **Phthalates**, found in some nail polish, fragrances and hair spray

(http://www.safecosmetics.org/faqs/index.cfm#What_are_some_of_the_most_harmful_ingredients_)

LEARN MORE, TAKE ACTION

- ❖ Visit www.SafeCosmetics.org Find out if your favorite products contain hazardous chemicals and find safer alternatives.
- ❖ **TELL YOUR COSMETICS COMPANIES YOU WANT SAFE PRODUCTS.**
- ❖ **CHECK THE SAFETY OF YOUR PRODUCTS.** Visit EWG's interactive product safety guide at www.ewg.org/skindeep.
- ❖ **SPREAD THE WORD**

References:

1. The Breast Cancer Fund. (2008). State of the Evidence: The connection between breast cancer and the environment. (Ed: J. Gray). Available: <http://www.breastcancerfund.org/site/pp.asp?c=kwKXLdPaE&b=206137>. Accessed June 25, 2008.
2. Toxic Free Legacy. Available: <http://www.toxicfreelegacy.org/safecosmetics/overview.html>. Accessed June 25, 2008.

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