

Cosmetic Companies and Breast Cancer

It sounds noble: a cosmetics company promises that if you buy one of its products, a portion of the sale will go toward “the fight against breast cancer.”

But what if that cosmetic contains chemicals that might actually increase your risk of developing the disease?

Many cosmetics contain chemicals known as **parabens and phthalates**, which **recent studies** indicate may be linked to cancer development.

- **Parabens** are chemical preservatives that have been identified as estrogenic and disruptive of normal hormone function. (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.)
- **Phthalates** are known to cause a broad range of birth defects and lifelong reproductive impairments in laboratory animals that are exposed to these chemicals during pregnancy and after birth. Phthalates are also known to be hormone-mimicking chemicals, many of which disrupt normal hormonal processes, raising concern about their implications for increased breast cancer risk.

There are numerous other chemicals of concern in personal care products. BCA is particularly concerned about progesterone, formaldehyde and coal tar due to their links to cancer. The Environmental Working Group recently released **Skin Deep**, a report on the safety of cosmetics and personal care products. Astonishingly, 1/3 of products tested contain one or more ingredients that are known, probable or possible human carcinogens.

Cosmetic companies will argue that we don't need to worry about harmful chemicals in their products because they are only used on our skin and hair. For example, the cosmetics industry has long stated that their widespread use of parabens and phthalates is not harmful because they remain on our skin and are not absorbed into our body. However, a recent study found parabens in human breast cancer tissue, raising obvious questions about the ability of parabens to accumulate in our bodies (Darbre et al. 2004). In September 2000 scientists from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found phthalates at surprisingly high levels in every one of 289 people tested, especially in women of reproductive age. The authors concluded that "from a public health perspective, these data provide evidence that phthalate exposure is both higher and more common than previously suspected" (Blount et al. 2000).

Many cosmetic companies will also argue that the level of a harmful chemical in any one product is not enough to harm you, based on studies of chemical exposure in adults. However, science is finding the timing of exposure is crucial, and that even a very small dose of some chemicals can have serious consequences in children and young women who are still developing. Also, we are rarely exposed to a chemical just one time. We may use the same product every day, several days a week, for months or years. In addition, we use dozens of personal care products daily, not just one. So while exposure from one product on one day may be small, the fact is we

use numerous products a day for extended periods of time. As a result, scientists are finding chemicals such as parabens and phthalates accumulating in our bodies.

Many diseases like cancer, asthma, birth defects and learning disabilities are on the rise, and there is growing evidence that these health problems are linked to the chemicals we are exposed to in our air, water, food, and everyday products. It's time we start acting to protect human health. **The Precautionary Principle**, a common sense approach to chemical use, says "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure". It guides us to take action to prevent exposure to chemicals we know or suspect are harmful to our health. In the case of cosmetics, when a product ingredient is known or strongly suspected of being harmful to our health, our top priority should be eliminating the use of this chemical and finding a safe substitute to replace it. In many cases, we know safe alternatives do exist and are already being used by **some cosmetic companies**. The notion of "safe" or "acceptable" levels of hazardous chemicals in our products should only be introduced when we *cannot* find alternatives. We are entitled to products that won't hurt us.

We can't let companies have it both ways

- **Avon** markets itself as "*the* company for women," claiming to be the largest corporate supporter of the breast cancer cause in the U.S. But many Avon products contain parabens, according to its own website (including Soy Milk Hand & Foot Therapy, Asian Pear with Ginseng Body Cream, Skin-So-Soft Moisturizing Hand Cream, and many others). Evidence suggests that young females with developing breast tissue are particularly vulnerable to the increased breast cancer risk associated with exposure to external estrogens. Last year, Avon launched a new cosmetics line called "mark," aimed at young women ages 16 to 24. The company is recruiting teenagers as sales representatives in this program. For more information on Breast Cancer Action's campaign, see the **Follow the Money** campaign.

*UPDATE: **Avon will be removing dibutyl phthalates** from its product lines. This is a small but important step by a corporate giant. It's important for the people Avon markets to, many of who are women of childbearing age, and it's important for future generations. BCA applauds this first step, and will continue to push Avon to remove other harmful ingredients from their products.*

- **Revlon** sponsors an annual 5K Run/Walk for Women that in part funds the Revlon/UCLA Women's Cancer Research Program—which, according to www.revlonrunwalk.com, works toward "the control and consequent elimination of women's cancers." Meanwhile, **The Safe Shopper's Bible** warns against carcinogenic ingredients in several Revlon products, including Revlon Powder Crème Blush, Revlon Powder Crème Make-Up Pressed Powder Full Matte, and Revlon Colorsilk Salon Formula Ammonia-Free Haircolor.

*UPDATE: in EWG's Skin Deep report, products were assigned scores from 0–10 based on the health concerns associated with their ingredients, with 10 being of highest health concern. Over 80% of the **Revlon products tested***

were rated 7.2 or higher. Revlon High Dimension 10 Minute Permanent Haircolor scored 9.6 and contains both known and suspected carcinogens.

- **Estée Lauder's** Breast Cancer Research Foundation (BCRF), which states its mission as "prevention and a cure in our lifetime," sponsors breast cancer efforts such as the Global Landmarks Illumination Initiative, in which national landmarks such as the Mall of America are spotlighted in pink lights—an effort that is far more likely to generate positive publicity for Estée Lauder than it is to prevent any woman from developing breast cancer. Their products containing parabens include Polished Performance Liquid Makeup and Precision Lash Mascara, according to *The Safe Shopper's Bible*.

UPDATE: Estée Lauder has announced it will reformulate its Clinique and MAC nail polishes to remove phthalates. BCA applauds this step, and will continue to push Estée Lauder to remove other harmful ingredients from their products.

- **Mary Kay**, whose web site proclaims that the company's charitable foundation is "committed to eliminating cancers affecting women," does not make it easy for consumers to find out if its products contain potentially harmful ingredients. It's extremely difficult for a consumer to identify what is in Mary Kay products: the cosmetics are not available in stores, their product descriptions on the web site do not list ingredients, and repeated attempts to get information about product content from a sales representative were unsuccessful.

Taken from <http://www.thinkbeforeyoupink.org>