

Organic Food, Cosmetics, and Your Skin

by Steve Meyerowitz, “Sproutman”

“The cosmetic industry has borrowed a page from the playbook of the tobacco industry by putting profits ahead of public health.” -Senator Edward M. Kennedy, September 10, 1997 hearings on the FDA Reform Bill (HR 1411)

We often think of organics in relation to diet, but skin products is the new frontier of organics. After all, the skin is the largest organ of the body, about 22 square feet for the average adult. Just below the top layer (the epidermis) is a complex section of blood vessels, nerve endings, and glands. The top layer is like a sponge, with thousands of pores absorbing whatever you put on it into the lower level. Think of it, how can you expect a lotion to work, unless it penetrates? So it is time to consider the quality of all those shampoos, lotions, shaving creams, aftershave, nail polish, etc. So, what exactly is that stuff that is penetrating into us? It turns out that there are over 200 different chemical compounds in common cosmetics and many of them get into the blood, glands, breast milk, nerves, and fatty tissues. If you're thinking about cancer right now, you guessed right! Phthalates, acrylamide, formaldehyde, ethylene oxide are just a few names you will find if you read the fine print. All of the latter are identified as carcinogenic and some are listed as reproductive toxins by the U.S. *Environmental Protection Agency*. The non-profit *Environmental Working Group* studied 7,500 personal care products and found that an astonishing one-third of all cosmetics contain ingredients classified as human carcinogens. The problem is that only 11% of the 10,500 ingredients in cosmetics has been assessed for safety by the *Cosmetics Safety Panel*, a self-policing industry safety committee. The result is that companies routinely market products that contain unsafe and untested ingredients.

Just for starters, consider the myriad of colors and used. Many colors are derived from coal tar, a known carcinogen. Coal tar hair dyes, in fact, are one of the few products for which the FDA has introduced a “consumer advice.” The advice essentially admonishes consumers to “reduce the risk of cancer” by reducing use of these hair dyes. These consumer advisories are not widely publicized or known. Neither is the fact that many colors have been banned because they were deemed carcinogenic and others, still in use, are alleged to be carcinogens and already banned in other countries. For example, FD&C yellow #10 is banned in Australia, USA and Norway, but yellow #5, which is linked to thyroid tumors and chromosomal damage among other things, is banned in Austria and Norway but still in use in the USA.

Perfumes are a major source of allergies. But many fragrances also contain phthalates, which are hormone disruptors that have demonstrated genital abnormalities in rodents and the potential for the same in baby boys.

Watch out. It's a marketing jungle out there. Many cosmetics used the word organic in their product names, or in their subtitles. But after you start to read the label, you notice mostly a lot of synthetic ingredients with one or two organic oils mixed in.

For example, one popular and reputable natural brand, *Nature's Gate Organics*, makes a liquid soap. It contains 36 ingredients. Of its top ten ingredients, only #6 is organic. The first five are Glyceryl Stearate, PEG-100 Stearate, Caprylic/Capric Triglyceride, Vegetable Glycerin, Sunflower Oil. While this is a “natural” product containing many fine herbal ingredients, the word “organic” in the trademark name and the presence of synthetics as the primary ingredients by volume, make it not exactly what you thought you were buying. On the other hand, Dr. Bronner's, another popular brand has a *Peppermint Pure-Castile Liquid Soap*. It has a total of nine ingredients all of which are organic except for citric acid and vitamin E: Organic coconut oil, organic olive oil, organic hemp oil, organic jojoba oil, citric acid, vitamin E, organic

peppermint oil, organic mentha arvensis, water.

Cosmetics are a marketing driven industry and there is lots of hype, and some blatant false advertising on skin products. Until now, there has been no government oversight. The USDA had to be sued in order to get them to regulate the organic ingredients listed on cosmetics. Their attitude was “we do food, not cosmetics.” But companies committed to organics complained: “why should it make a difference if an organic olive oil is use for a food or for the skin?” But don’t expect to see the organic insignia widely displayed on personal care products. Most products will fail to achieve the 95% organic ingredient standard require for use of the insignia. Those with 70% or greater organic ingredients will not have an insignia, but can display the words “*Made with Organic Ingredients.*” You’ll see more of that. There may still be synthetics included, and many synthetics are indeed safe to use. Stay tuned for these unfolding events and keep reading your labels.

How to Get More Information

The Campaign for Safe Cosmetics <http://safecosmetics.org>

Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/list.html>

The Environmental Working Group <http://www.ewg.org>

Some Controversial Ingredients in a Common “Natural” Cosmetic Product¹

ALBERTO VO5 CONDITIONER - Essence of Neutral Henna

Ingredients on the label include: formaldehyde (carcinogenic); polysorbate 80 (contaminated with the carcinogens ethylene oxide and dioxane); FD & C Red #4 (carcinogenic); fragrance (wide range of undisclosed ingredients)

Some Ingredients to Watch Out for²

PARABENS. Hormonal (endocrine disruptive)

DIAZOLIDINYL UREA. Precursor of the potent carcinogen formaldehyde

QUATERNIUM 15. Precursor of the potent carcinogen formaldehyde

LAURETHs. Contaminated with potent volatile carcinogens, ethylene oxide and dioxane

CETEARETHs. Contaminated with potent volatile carcinogens, ethylene oxide and dioxane

POLYSORBATEs. Contaminated with potent volatile carcinogens, ethylene oxide and dioxane

PEGs. Contaminated with potent volatile carcinogens, ethylene oxide and dioxane

TRIETHANOLAMINE. Interacts with nitrites to form the potent carcinogen nitrosamine

FD&C RED 40. Questionable carcinogen.

TALC (talcum powder). Easily inhaled. Can cause pulmonary talcosis (lung disease)

SODIUM LAURYL SULFATE. Common shampoo ingredient. A harsh irritant

*For more information, read **THE ORGANIC FOOD GUIDE. How to Shop Smarter and Eat Healthier.** By Steve Meyerowitz or visit <http://www.sproutman.com/organic.html>*

1. Dr. Samuel Epstein, Professor of Occupational and Environmental Medicine at the School of Public Health, University of Illinois Medical Center in Chicago, co-author, the Safe Shoppers Bible. Natural Products Expo Seminar, March 2005.

2. Ibid.