

Sustainable Belmont: Consider safety when using personal care products

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BELMONT, MASS. –We have become increasingly cautious about the health risks posed by harmful substances found in pesticides, various food additives, and air pollution, but what about the shampoo, soap, lotion, deodorant, and makeup we use on our bodies? We are in close, everyday contact with chemicals in personal care products, yet many of us do not consider the long-term impact they might have on our health.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which regulates personal care products, has tested only a small percentage of the more than 10,000 ingredients used in these products and, of those, has banned only nine on the basis of being "possibly harmful." In stark contrast, the European Union has banned more than 1,000 substances that have been known to cause (or are strongly suspected of causing) cancer, neurological and reproductive problems, and a host of other illnesses.

These chemicals include known carcinogens such as coal tar, used in some dandruff shampoos; formaldehyde, a common ingredient in nail polish; and lead acetate, found in some hair dyes. Personal care products often include substances such as parabens (preservatives) and phthalates (used to extend the life of chemical fragrances) as well. The Environmental Working Group maintains an extensive list of harmful chemicals and products on its Web site, www.ewg.org/skindeep. It is also worth avoiding products containing petroleum-derived ingredients (including parabens and many others); they are not only a health risk but prolong our dependence on fossil fuels and contribute to air and water pollution in the way in which they are extracted and refined.

Consumer advocacy groups, such as the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics (www.safecosmetics.org), have succeeded in getting some manufacturers to eliminate harmful ingredients, but because the FDA does not require manufacturers to list all chemicals on ingredient labels, it is still difficult for consumers to know which products are truly safe. In cases like this, it is best for consumers to adopt the "precautionary principle." As the Science and Environmental Health Network describes this principle, "When an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically."

How can consumers make more informed choices when shopping for personal care products? First, read labels carefully, and actively avoid products that contain ingredients known to be harmful (these are listed in the Web sites above). You can also patronize companies that have signed the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics' pledge to eliminate harmful chemicals from their products. Next, seek products that contain less harmful alternatives. For example, citrus and

other essential oils provide fragrance without phthalates; shea and other nut butters soften skin naturally; and olive-oil soaps clean and moisturize the skin at the same time. And if there are products you either can't bear to get rid of, or can't find in less-toxic versions, be sure to use them as sparingly as possible.

Most importantly, let personal care product manufacturers know that you care about the chemicals that come in contact with you and your family's bodies. Praise the companies that are taking steps to be safer, and tell the companies who aren't that you won't buy their products again until they pledge to clean up their acts.

By doing so, manufacturers will realize that they have to market safe products since consumers will demand nothing less.

To learn more about safer alternatives to personal care products, contact Sustainable Belmont at sustainablebelmont@gmail.com.