[IMAGE]

Cause for Concern

How Safe Are Your Favorite Skin Care Products?

By Christine H. Farlow, DC

Every day, we slather lotions, creams and other products on our bodies in the name of better health and vitality. But have you ever looked at the ingredients in these products? Do you know whether they're safe? Recent studies suggest we should probably be taking a closer look at what's in those bottles.

Manufacturers put pretty labels on packages to make them look fresh, natural and healthy because there's a growing consumer demand for healthy, natural products. More and more manufacturers are claiming their products are all natural and pure with no harmful ingredients. Can you believe what these companies are saying about their products?

A lot of companies want a piece of the natural and organic pie. But not all of these companies are willing to go the distance to create products that are truly all natural with only healthy ingredients. That's unfortunate, particularly for the uninformed consumer who buys them.

How Natural Is Natural?

image - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark How do you know who to believe and who not to believe? How do you know who to trust? Until recently, there were no organic standards for cosmetics and personal care products in the U.S. A few companies manufactured their products according to the National Organic Program criteria, the standards for organic food. This was the only way to label their products as "Certified Organic."

Cancer-causing contaminants have been found recently in personal care products claiming to be organic. However, there was not a trace of carcinogen detected in the "Certified Organic" products evaluated. The chemical, 1,4-dioxane, is the contaminant in question, commonly found in many synthetic ingredients frequently used by the cosmetic and personal care product industry.

The study, commissioned by the Organic Consumer's Association, brings to light a serious problem rampant throughout the cosmetic and personal care product industry in the U.S. The industry is unregulated. Manufacturers are not accountable to any regulating body for the quality or safety of the ingredients they use in their products.

It is up to you, the consumer, to make sure the products you buy are safe and healthy to use. This may seem like a daunting, nearly impossible task for the ordinary person, but it's easy if you have the right tools.

Recently, several organic-certifying options have become available in the United States. Ecocert is a France-based organic-certification group that has been certifying products in Europe for some time. Ecocert's standards allow nonorganic and petroleum-derived ingredients in products they certify as organic. They have also been known to certify products that don't meet their standards. Ecocert's standards are weak and actually allow products to be misrepresented as organic when they contain nonorganic, synthetic and petroleum-derived ingredients. The Ecocert standards do not meet the National Organic Program standards.

Leading companies in the cosmetic and personal care industry developed the Organic and Sustainable Industry Standards (OASIS). As the demand for natural and organic products is increasing, the mainstream industry, which produces synthetic, nonorganic, petroleum-based products, is vying for its piece of the organic pie. The OASIS standards allow organic certification for products that contain nonorganic ingredients "grown with synthetic fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides, and preserved with synthetic petrochemical preservatives."OASIS standards are not true organic standards.

image - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Certech is a new, Canada-based certifying body that promises high standards strictly conforming "to the principles, guidelines and regulations already in existence internationally," including the National Organic Program. As of this writing, Creech has only certified one product line: Canadian Eugenic D'Avicenna Natural and Organic personal care products. This will be the organic cosmetic and personal care product certifying body to watch. Products certified by Certech will probably be closest to meeting the standards of the National Organic Program of all the certification programs. Time will tell, as Certech certifies more and more products, if it really is setting the high standard of organic certification for cosmetics and personal care products that the "true" organic industry demands.

With all the misinformation about organic products in the marketplace now, how can you be sure to get truly natural, organic products with all healthy ingredients? For starters, learn to read labels. Skip the pretty packaging and natural/organic promises on the front of the item. Go straight for the ingredients list on the back of the package. This is where you'll find the truth about the healthiness of the product. Frequently, the ingredients are listed in tiny print that blends in with the color of the packaging. If the ingredient list is too hard for you to read, don't let that stop you. That's exactly what deceitful manufacturers want. Buy a magnifying glass and carry it with you.

Shop Smart

Here are a few key ingredients that are best to avoid when shopping for cosmetics and personal care products:

Preservatives: They are added to kill bacteria and other organisms from contaminating the product and to give it a longer shelf life. However, many preservatives are irritants and cause contact dermatitis. Some even release formaldehyde, a known cancer-causing chemical. Formaldehyde-releasing preservatives includeDMDM hydantoin, Imidazolidinyl urea, diazolidinyl urea, quaternium 15, sodium hydroxymethylglycinate and bronopol (2-bromo-2-nitropropane-1,3-diol).

Other preservatives that are also best avoided: Benzethonium chloride, BHA, BHT, diazolidinyl urea, imidazolidinyl urea, phenoxyethanol and methylisothiazolinone.

Endocrine disruptors: Parabens, in addition to being preservatives, are xenoestrogens or endocrine disrupters. They disturb the hormone balance in your body. They are also skin sensitizers and have the potential to cause allergic reactions. They have been found in breast cancer tumors, but it is not known if they cause breast cancer. The most common parabens used in cosmetics and personal care products include butylparaben, ethylparaben, methylparaben and propylparaben.

Fragrances: A single fragrance can be made of as many as 600 different ingredients. None of these ingredients is required to be listed on the label. Some of the chemicals used in fragrances are hazardous. A number of them may even cause cancer. Even products listed as "fragrance-free" actually may have fragrance added to mask offensive odors.

1,4-dioxane: Thisis a cancer-causing contaminant found in many ingredients commonly used in cosmetics and personal care products. It will never be listed on the label because manufacturers are not required to disclose contaminants. Ingredients that may be contaminated with 1,4-dioxane include polysorbates, polyoxyethylene, polyethylene, polyethylene glycol, any chemical with "PEG" in the name, and anything ending in *-eth*, such as sodium laureth sulfate.

Artificial colors: Most artificial colors are derived from coal tar, which is known to cause cancer. Generally, artificial colors are designated either as FD&C, D&C or as a color with a number after it, such as FD&C Red No. 40, D&C Green No. 5 or Yellow No. 6.

Talc: Talc may contain cancer-causing contaminants. It's a common ingredient in makeup and baby powder. Products containing talc should never be used on the genital area or on infants and children.

Antibacterial agents: We have become overly obsessed with killing germs in the name of preventing illness. Antibacterial soaps are not only unnecessary, but also harmful. Triclosan, the most commonly used antibacterial agent, is classified as a drug by the FDA and as a pesticide by the EPA.

It's not an antibiotic, but studies show that triclosan acts like an antibiotic in the way it kills bacteria and may contribute to the development of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. It's also found in a wide variety of other products, including deodorants, cosmetics, lotions, creams, toothpastes, mouthwashes, detergents, dish soaps and laundry soaps. Triclosan is getting into our bodies at toxic levels. It's stored in body fat, has been found in mother's breast milk, in urine samples of children and cord blood of newborns.

Another common antibacterial agent used in personal care products is triclocarban. It has not been adequately studied for toxicity. What is known is that it's also a pesticide and breaks down into some cancer-causing chemicals.

MSG: Most people are aware that MSG in food causes a reaction in some people. But did you know that MSG can be hidden in your personal care products too? MSG is a neurotoxin and excito-toxin. It's toxic to your nervous system and excites your bran cells to death. Watch out for ingredients like hydrolyzed protein, amino acids, yeast extract and glutamic acid which are common sources of hidden MSG in cosmetics and personal care products.

Other ingredients: These are ingredients that are considered a trade secret by the manufacturer. The company does not want you to know what these chemicals are. You have no way of knowing if these ingredients are safe of harmful.

It's important to note that these chemicals are not only in products for adults. They are also in the products you use on your infants and children, even in products that are labeled as safe and gentle.

Deceptive Marketing

Natural and organic products are becoming increasingly popular as people are becoming more health conscious. Not all natural products are what they appear to be. Some key terms that give the impression of safer and healthier products have no official definition. Here are a few examples:

- ***Natural*** - suggests the ingredients are derived from natural sources rather than being produced synthetically. However, there are no industry standards for what natural means. The product may contain all natural ingredients, just a few natural ingredients added to a synthetic product or even no natural ingredients at all.
- ***Hypoallergenic*** - mean the manufacturer believes the product is less likely to cause allergic reactions. But there are no standards for classifying a product hypoallergenic. The manufacturer may actually test the product before classifying it hypoallergenic or simply remove fragrances and call it hypoallergenic. The manufacturer is not required to prove this claim.
- ***Fragrance-Free*** - means the product has no detectable odor. Fragrance ingredients may still be added to mask offensive odors from the materials used to make the product.

You can protect yourself and your family and ensure the products you buy are safe and healthy by following some simple guidelines. First, learn to read labels, including determining which ingredients are safe and which are not. Second, choose products that are certified organic through the National Organic Program, the food organic standards, rather than the pseudo-organic standards of Ecocert or OASIS. Third, if organic isn't that important to you or not within your budget, at least make sure that all the ingredients listed on the label are safe.

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