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EcoConsumer

Does your makeup need a nontoxic makeover?

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

When your personal-care products could cause cancer, that's a little too personal.

Most of us use 15 or more cosmetic and toiletry products each day, such as shampoo, skin cream, deodorant, sunscreen, nail polish and perfume. The personal-care products used by Americans contain 10,500 different chemicals, according to the Seattle-based Toxic-Free Legacy Coalition.

Only 11 percent of these chemicals have been assessed for health and safety by any U.S. government agency, says the coalition, and one-third of all personal-care products contain at least one chemical linked to cancer. Some chemicals in these products also have links to birth defects and other health problems.

Chemicals in cosmetics that pose health risks, according to the Coalition, include suspected and proven carcinogens such as formaldehyde and coal tar, phthalates (alleged endocrine disrupters) and neurotoxins such as lead and mercury.

Many problem ingredients do not appear on labels. Under current federal law, the cosmetics industry largely regulates itself. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not require cosmetics manufacturers to have their products pre-approved before they are sold, to report cosmetics-related injuries or to file data on ingredients.

The Cosmetic, Toiletry and Fragrance Association, a major industry trade group, insists that concerns over health risks are unwarranted, stating, "FDA statistics confirm that cosmetics are one of the safest categories of products used by Americans today."

Check your makeup

Several encouraging developments have occurred recently. An online cosmetics-safety database for

consumers, called "Skin Deep," underwent a major makeover in May. This update made it more comprehensive and easier to use.

Highlighting ingredients that may pose safety risks, this ambitious database maintained by the nonprofit Environmental Working Group (EWG) lists ingredients in 25,000 products. That's still only one-quarter of the personal-care products on the market. But you will probably find data about several products you use. It might even inspire your own cosmetics-purchasing makeover.

Europe REACHes out

In the European Union, a new law known as REACH (Registration, Evaluation and Authorisation of Chemicals) created the European Chemicals Agency on June 1. The law requires companies to register product-safety information with the agency, and will likely result in new bans of chemicals.

Even before REACH, Europe had already banned more than 1,000 ingredients in cosmetics, compared with just eight cosmetic ingredients outlawed in the U.S., according to Consumers Union.

Some cosmetics companies market different versions of products, with the U.S. versions containing chemicals not allowed in the E.U. But as this becomes more difficult for manufacturers, both logistically and from a public-relations standpoint, more companies will likely remove targeted chemicals from their American products.

U.S. laws to become stronger?

Congress may soon consider making U.S. chemical regulations stronger, in response to Europe's REACH. Activity has already begun on the state level. The California Safe Cosmetics Act of 2005 requires, among other provisions, that manufacturers report the use of potentially unsafe ingredients.

A similar bill in Washington state did not make it out of committee this year. The Toxic-Free Legacy Coalition expects related legislation will be reintroduced in Olympia in 2008.

The cosmetics industry has responded to the increased scrutiny of its products by developing a Consumer Commitment Code and emphasizing the role of its Cosmetic Ingredient Review program.

What you can do

To reduce the likelihood of risks from your personal-care products, consult the "Skin Deep" database and follow these additional tips:

- Use caution with problem products. The EWG has identified hair dye, nail polish, "sunless tanning" products, "anti-aging" potions and skin lighteners as product categories with significant potential problems.

- Reduce use of fragrances. Manufacturers rarely disclose fragrance ingredients. Fragrances may contain neurotoxins and trigger allergies, says the EWG. Even products marketed as "unscented" often include a masking fragrance to cover chemical odors.
- Be skeptical of product claims. Cosmetics manufacturers don't have to verify terms such as "natural" or "organic."
- Keep it simple. In general, the fewer ingredients, the lower the risk.

Tom Watson writes the EcoConsumer column for digs on Saturdays. He is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services. Reach him at tom.watson@metrokc.gov or 206-296-4481. Watch for more EcoConsumer resources from King County at www.KCecoconsumer.com.