

Homes & Real Estate

Originally published September 19, 2014 at 8:02 PM | Page modified September 27, 2014 at 8:47 AM

Avoid risky ingredients when choosing personal-care products

These ingredients may do the job, helping us to smell, look or feel better. But research indicates various commonly used chemicals in personal-care products potentially pose threats to our health and the environment.

By Tom Watson

Special to NWhomes

Ecoconsumer

Where could you find hundreds of different chemicals, many of them complex, unpronounceable and unregulated? Besides at a chem lab, they could actually be in your own bathroom.

Our cosmetics and other personal-care products have evolved into scientific marvels. Just look at the ingredients list on a few of your products. If one ingredient is listed as “fragrance,” which is typical, it likely contains numerous additional chemicals the manufacturer doesn’t have to disclose.

These ingredients may do the job, helping us to smell, look or feel better. But research indicates various commonly used chemicals in personal-care products potentially pose threats to our health and the environment.

The good news is that a few major manufacturers and retailers of these products have recently become more responsive to safety concerns from the public and media.

Some companies now offer healthier and more eco-friendly alternatives, and several have said they will take action to limit their use of questionable ingredients such as triclosan (antibacterial and antifungal agent) and polyethylene (microplastic beads).

The chemical industry has largely succeeded in making this type of self-regulation the standard in the U.S. for personal-care products. Manufacturers assert that because they police their own chemicals and products, very little government regulation is needed.

In Europe, where the “precautionary principle” is the standard, companies may be required to prove ingredient safety if research indicates reasons for concern. The European Union restricts the use of many ingredients in cosmetics that are allowed here. Some companies make one version of their products for the U.S. market and another for countries with stronger regulations.

Taking action

Responding to public pressure, some states are blazing their own regulatory path. In May, Minnesota became the first state to ban triclosan in many consumer personal-hygiene products, effective in 2017. Commonly used in antibacterial soaps, triclosan has been linked to cancer and endocrine disruption.

Some companies have begun to phase out their use of triclosan, but other manufacturers have stood firm. Colgate’s use of triclosan in its popular Total toothpaste came under fire this summer by health

advocates, but the company insists triclosan has significant benefits and no risks.

In June, Illinois became the first state to ban microscopic beads of polyethylene and other plastics in personal-care products such as facial scrubs, deodorants and toothpastes, starting in 2018. These microbeads probably do not stay on or in your body, tests show. But when they wash down the drain, wastewater treatment is unlikely to capture all of them.

California, Ohio and New York have also considered microbead bans. The New York Attorney General's office estimates that up to 19 tons of plastic microbeads wash down drains each year in that state alone.

Microbeads and other chemicals often end up in waterways, where fish may ingest them. They can then go up the food chain and into our diets.

Several major manufacturers — including Procter & Gamble, Johnson & Johnson and Colgate — have announced plans to phase out the use of plastic microbeads. Biodegradable alternatives for scrubbing, such as ground-up fruit pits, are readily available.

Safer alternatives

Jennifer Dietrich, a local chemist with a Ph.D., makes and sells the cosmetics lines Atomic Cosmetics and Xerion Skin Science at her Capitol Hill store, Dr. Jen's House of Beauty (colorsthatgoboom.com).

Dietrich gives out cards listing "Skin care's 'dirty dozen' chemicals," which aren't in her products. These include chemicals that are known to be sketchy, including parabens and phthalates, along with more obscure ingredients such as propylene glycol, diazolidinyl urea and butylated hydroxytoluene.

For information about ingredients in personal-care products, consult the nonprofit Environmental Working Group's "Skin Deep" database at cosmeticsdatabase.com.

Seek out retailers that specialize in safer cosmetics and personal-care products, such as Dietrich's store and website or Beautycounter.com. Wherever you shop, check labels, buy the safest products and let store staff know that you want more healthy choices.

"Feel comfortable in your own skin" is oft-quoted advice, but we should also feel comfortable with what we put on our skin.

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