

Saving Face with Greener Cosmetics

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In my continuing effort to be an informed consumer, I've been scrutinizing cosmetics labels. If I'm applying it to my body, whether it's something I eat or something I rub on, I want to know what's in it. Cosmetics, a broad category meaning anything non-medicinal used for enhancement, is a huge and largely self-regulating industry. We consumers have to make smart choices if we want to protect our health.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) oversees the cosmetics industry, but the FDA only requires that cosmetics be produced in clean factories, contain no poisons or rotten or harmful ingredients, and be clearly labeled. The FDA does not test cosmetics ingredients nor does it require testing. Companies can use whatever ingredients they like with little true accountability, and they can make claims about their products without actually proving they work.

Researchers have begun to raise more questions about the possible harmful effects of some ingredients, particularly parabens, which may disrupt hormones. Nowadays it's not unusual to see a product labeled "paraben-free." The Burt's Bees facial cleanser I purchased at my local pharmacy, for instance, is labeled: "100% natural" and "Never any sulfates, parabens, phthalates, or petrochemicals," but it still has a hefty list of ingredients I can't readily identify. Other ingredients, sometimes called "fragrances" or "dyes" have been linked to cancer or allergies or determined to

be neurotoxins.

The Environmental Working Group (EWG) compiled a database that rates cosmetics safety according to ingredients, a handy tool for consumers and one that I refer to often. I've discovered that it's important to check *items*, not just brands, and be skeptical of labels that say "organic" or "natural." The EWG also has a printable shopper's guide for consumers who want to know which ingredients to avoid in cosmetics, cleansers, and other hygiene products. (See resources section.) Reputable companies, such as Tom's of Maine, disclose their products' ingredients on their company websites.

When it comes to any product, whether I use it for food, for cleaning, or for cosmetics, I've found that the simpler it is, the safer it is—generally speaking. For instance, pure olive or coconut oil with a few drops of an essential oil for fragrance can be used as a moisturizer right after a shower. A loofah sponge makes a good skin exfoliator.

I also try to avoid using products when there are other solutions. Sunscreens, while sometimes necessary, can be expensive and chemical-laden, so my fair-skinned kids wear swim shirts and I have a collection of wide-brimmed hats for the summer. Rather than using nail polish, which the Environmental Protection Agency has deemed a hazardous substance, I buff my nails and keep them filed for a neat appearance.

Using fewer products saves time, and it also saves packaging, too—a

bar of soap, for instance, works as well as a body wash, but doesn't require a petroleum-based plastic container that I have to recycle later. Lately I've been indulging in soaps made by a woman in my community—they work great and smell fantastic thanks to herbs from her garden. Buying frequently used items in bulk—such as shampoo—also saves packaging.

If I take a holistic approach to my health—daily exercise, good food, lots of water, enough sleep—I don't have to bother with a lot of extra cosmetics, unless it's a special occasion and I want to use more. And I feel great inside and out! ■

Resources

The FDA's consumer guide to cosmetics, which explains responsible use of cosmetics, as well as what the FDA does and doesn't do to protect consumers. www.fda.gov/forconsumers/byaudience/forwomen/ucm118491.htm

The Environmental Working Group—Skin Deep Database. This searchable database is indispensable for finding affordable, available, and safe products. www.ewg.org/skindeep

The Environmental Working Group's "Shopper's Guide to Safe Cosmetics." A handy printable resource to take with you to the store. www.ewg.org/files/EWG_cosmeticsguide.pdf

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