

HealthyLife CT

Beauty Beware: Toxins still common in skin care products

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By Abby Luby

A kiss on the hand may be quite continental but the imprint of ruby-red lips, the mark of passion, is today's "kiss-and-tell" of something less romantic and more troubling: The creamy crimson stick can be made with lead, a known toxic substance.

Last fall, the [Food and Drug Administration](#) issued a new study showing many lipsticks contain high amounts of lead. This can be cause for alarm when you consider that in our lifetime, we swab our kissers with an estimated four pounds (1.8 kilograms) of lipstick, according to the [Environmental Working Group](#), a watchdog organization that specializes in environmental research for toxic chemicals. EWG rates cosmetics based on ingredients on its popular website "Skin Deep."

Smearing your smoocher with leaded lipstick isn't necessarily the kiss of death, but because lead is a potent neurotoxin, it's linked to numerous health and reproductive problems. Pregnant women are particularly vulnerable to lead in lipstick, according to the FDA study, because lead easily crosses the placenta and enters the fetal brain, where it can interfere with normal development.

It makes you think. What you put on your skin doesn't just seep into your pores; it gets absorbed in layers of skin and wades into the bloodstream. Lurking in our daytime moisturizers, makeup, age-fighting serums, body gels and hand lotions are a host of harmful chemicals that are known and suspected carcinogens. The better-known chemicals are formaldehyde (a preservative), dioxane (an industrial solvent), sodium lauryl sulfate (a foaming



Toxins still common in makeup and skin care products.

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agent) and parabens. Parabens are a class of preservative chemicals used in some 25,000 personal care products to assure a long shelf life. These chemicals figure high on the danger list of toxic ingredients; a recent study found parabens inside breast cancer tumors.

"Parabens are estrogenic," says [Nneka Leiba](#), a researcher with the EWG. "That means that they mimic estrogen, which can disrupt hormone systems that guide so many processes in the body. That's a concern."

It's hard to associate prettying up with makeup or lathering on moisturizing cream with something dangerous. But it's hard to avoid. Over the past few decades, a growing number of studies show multiple, adverse affects of chemically laden skin products.

Enter front stage center: the organic cosmetic industry. If you've already sought out natural and organic skin care products and cosmetics, you probably recognize ingredients such as organic olive oil, organic cocoa butter, vitamin E (Tocopheryl Acetate), vitamin A, steam distilled water, organic jojoba oil -- to name just a few. Many mainstream, popular skin products sold in department stores or drugstores also use some of these natural ingredients, but mix them in with mainstays such as sulfates, petroleum, mineral oil, paraffins, Propylene Glycol, artificial color or fragrances.

"We carry eight lines of organic and natural facial care products," says [Barry Sherr](#), longtime owner of [Chamomille Natural Foods](#) in Danbury. It wasn't too long after he first opened 31 years ago that he started selling natural skin products. He says it was slow going. "We didn't carry much -- Dr. Bronner's Castile soap, some essential oils, Tom's toothpaste. Since then, as we and our customers became more knowledgeable, we began to carry natural and organic makeup, mascaras and eyeliners, also nail polish without solvents."

Health food stores may have been the launching point for natural and organic skin care, but today, companies making these products have a dominating, direct-buy presence on the Internet. They are also used more at beauty salons and spas.

"We've had quite a lot of people asking for more natural products," says [Jessica Moutinho](#), a licensed skin specialist and aesthetician at Agora Spa in Stamford. Moutinho, who has worked at Agora for five years, has seen growing numbers of clients wanting facials using products with fewer chemicals. "I've seen great results using a natural product line rather than synthetic, perfumed products. The natural products help healthy cells to grow and are 100 percent better for people's skin," says Moutinho.

Many natural-based skin care products use essential oils because they are easily absorbed by the deeper layers of our skin. Essential oils have a similar molecular structure to the oils in our skin. Using a process called steam distillation, essential oils are extracted from natural substances such

as grasses, flowers, herbs, shrubs, trees, resins and spices. These oils help eliminate dead cells and grow new ones.

For the skin care industry in general, effectively getting ingredients into our skin has been given a boost by nanotechnology. Nanotechnology uses tiny, atom-size particles and molecules to manipulate materials. We're thinking infinitesimal here -- a human hair is about 80,000 nanometers in diameter. Nanotechnology is used in just about every personal care product on the market, from deodorant, soap, toothpaste and shampoo to anti-wrinkle cream, moisturizer, foundation and more.

But warnings about the new technology by dermatologists and skin care professionals have been escalating. Dr. [Julia Sabetta](#), a specialist in cosmetic dermatology since 1983 and a practicing skin surgeon in Greenwich and Westport, is among those concerned about possible negative affects of this new technology. On the one hand, because the tiny particles go deep, they can effectively nourish the skin. "But it may be a double-edged sword," Sabetta says. "Maybe there's something we don't want to get into our skin so deeply. We are especially questioning sun block, which uses nano-sized titanium dioxide technology to tone down the pasty white look. But it changes the properties of the sun block, and if it is absorbed in the deeper layers of the skin and then into the bloodstream, it may not be safe for the body."

Preliminary scientific research confirms Sabetta's fears: Nanoparticles can penetrate cell walls, including organ tissues. "In general, nanotechnology sounds good but you have to look a step further. Nanotechnology is not going to be a natural panacea," she says.

Because the federal Food and Drug Administration cannot force cosmetic companies to provide safety data on their products, we don't really know which ones are made with nanochemicals.



Consumers shouldn't be fooled by a product just because it uses the word 'natural.' Photo: IStockphoto.com, Eugene Bochkarev / ©iStockphoto.com

The only vague hint we have is the FDA label that reads "Warning: The safety of this product has not been determined." The cryptic message is on any skin care packaging that contains an ingredient that has yet to be proven safe.

Labels are tricky, whether they use the words "natural," "organic" or the order in which they list ingredients.

We are our own scrutinizing

watchdogs when it comes to what we put on our skin. EWG's Leiba warns that a product using the word "natural" doesn't necessarily mean a product is safe.

"There are some natural ingredients that shouldn't be used on your skin, like tomatoes, which are very acidic. Also, essential oils from different plants are natural but may irritate the skin. Consumers shouldn't be fooled by a product just because it uses the word 'natural.'"

The advocacy group Campaign for Safe Cosmetics has galvanized a movement around the labeling issue. CSC's program "Compact for Safe Cosmetics," is an initiative that asks cosmetic companies to voluntarily pledge to avoid using ingredients that are known or suspected to be hazardous to human health. The Compact's 1,000 members are mostly small and midsize U.S. companies. They are listed on the website, www.safecosmetics.org. Another consumer friendly site is www.cosmeticsdatabase.com; the Environmental Working Group's Skin Deep cosmetic safety database is user friendly when checking out ingredients in more than 42,000 products.

Sabetta says she wishes the FDA would start to police the cosmetic industry as a safety measure for her patients. "Knowing if a product is safe takes a lot of testing, not just people putting it on their skin and looking better," she says. "You have to do studies with biopsies and other high-tech tests to see if it really works or not."

Skin care products labeled natural or organic are well anchored in the overall drive to maintain our health, both inside and out. After all, if we keep active as we age, there's no reason we shouldn't be able to plant painted, energetic kisses full of ardor but emptied of toxins. HL