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Good Morning

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Pretty Ugly: Cosmetics Ingredients Linked to Breast Cancer?

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Even at the youngest ages, little girls find their way into their mother's makeup kit, making a mess of lipstick, eye shadow and mascara on their face. And as girls grow older, they begin the delicate debate with their parents over what type of makeup they can wear and when. However, mothers and fathers everywhere may have one more tool in their arsenal for convincing their daughters to delay that trip to the cosmetics counter.

A new study suggests that women who begin using makeup at an earlier age and in greater amounts may have an increased risk of developing breast cancer later in life.

"There is growing evidence that we should be particularly concerned about the use of makeup by teenagers and children," says Dr. Janet Gray, professor at Vassar College and creator of a new CD that outlines the evidence linking certain products and materials to breast cancer risk.

Don't worry, you don't have to toss out your entire makeup bag, says Gray. The results of her compilation of previous research indicate a strong association between some common ingredients in cosmetics, but not all. So, a smart cosmetics consumer can try to make smarter choices when it comes to picking out particular products.

The worst offenders, it seems, are shampoos and other hair care products marketed to the African American community. Many of these products have placenta extracts inside, which contain adult hormones, like estrogen. And for many years, estrogens have been known to increase breast cancer risk. Manufacturers claim that these placenta extracts are used in shampoos to help strengthen hair and reduce breakage. "You can go to any drug store and find shampoos that advertise placenta extracts," said Gray.

These estrogen-laden products, when used in high amounts by young girls may also cause early puberty, which is a separate factor that can influence breast cancer risk.

But even avoiding these particular hair care products may not be enough. Besides estrogens, there are two chemicals commonly found in many personal care products that may also be putting you at risk—and they aren't always clearly labeled.

Parabens are a group of chemicals used as a preservative in many personal-care products, such as lotions, shampoo, sunscreen, skin foundation and bath gels. They are used to prevent the growth of bacteria and other organisms in the bottle, but they also acts like a weak estrogen. In some studies, exposure to environmental estrogens, like parabens, has been linked to a higher risk of breast cancer.

The other indicated chemical group, phthalates, can be found in nail and hair products, including gels, mousses and hair sprays, as well as skin creams and lotions. These chemicals are used to help the skin absorb the product, but they have been linked to certain birth defects and cancer. Like parabens, they also seem to disrupt the natural hormones in the body, which in turn, may increase the risk of breast cancer.

Estrogens, phthalates and parabens may collect in the tissue over time and slowly alter healthy cells. Gray suggests that this is why teens and adolescents may be the most susceptible to their ill effects as,

over years of use, there may be cumulative damage.

“Adolescence is the time when breasts are developing, so this is clearly a time when exposure matters for developing breast cancer 20 to 30 years later,” says Gray.

Fortunately, some companies have begun making strides in removing these chemicals from their products. OPI, Orly and Sally Hansen, for example, have removed phthalates from all of their nail products. And other major cosmetics companies are following their lead.

“Reformulating to remove dangerous chemicals is so much better than arguing about how much of these chemicals is OK to use in nail polishes,” said Jeanne Rizzo, a registered nurse and executive director of the San Francisco-based Breast Cancer Fund.

Gray suggests doing a little homework to figure out which products are safest to use. Some websites, such as www.safecosmetics.org, list those companies who have promised to remove these chemicals from their products. Also, try to use less makeup and lotion to reduce exposure and perhaps lower the amount of chemicals that will collect in your body over time.

“Each time you put on lipstick isn’t going to cause cancer,” says Gray. “But it’s the additive effect of years of lipstick, lotion and other environmental risks.”

Also, educate teens and children about why wearing too much makeup or using too many hair care products may be harmful to them.

“Makeup is a part of our culture,” says Gray. “But if you are going to use it, realize that you are putting chemicals on your body.”

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