

http://www.boston.com/dailyglobe2/289/living/Scent_of_trouble_surrounds_cosmetics+.shtml

Boston Globe

Scent of trouble surrounds cosmetics Women shun products with chemical linked to birth defects

By Sally Jacobs, Globe Staff, 10/16/2002

Devon Moser loves perfume. She has worn it every day of her life since she was a child. Although "Green Tea" is her hands-down favorite, other cherished scents fill more than half of her medicine cabinet. But since this summer, she has worn hardly a drop.

Moser, 26, thinks her perfume may have something to do with the difficulty her 5-year-old daughter has in talking. And with her erratic spinning around the room. And with all the other symptoms that doctors suspect might indicate autism. But, then again, she wonders if her daughter's problems might be linked to nail polish, which Moser now uses only sparingly. Or her hand lotion. Or her other makeup, all of which is gathering dust on her bathroom shelf.

"I have cut down almost completely on makeup, much as I hate to say it, because I have a lot of imperfections on my face," said Moser, a lawyer who lives in Ohio and is the mother of two children. "But I am afraid it's going to do something to me or the kids."

Moser's fear can be summed up in a single word that most people have never heard of: phthalates. Phthalates (pronounced without the "ph") are a family of chemicals used as softeners in a host of items from toys to medical supplies, as well as in many personal-care products, including cosmetics and shampoo. Simmering questions about their safety, which have hovered over the scientific and regulatory communities for years, have been inflamed by a report released this past summer, which found the chemicals present in a majority of cosmetics tested by an independent laboratory in Chicago.

The results, published in part in a riveting full-page ad in The New York Times in July featuring a pregnant woman and a bottle of perfume, commanded widespread attention. (The full report is available online at www.NotTooPretty.org.) Now, as federal agencies take another look at the chemicals - which are ubiquitous in the typical home despite having been linked to birth defects in numerous animal studies - many women are backing away from their vanity tables and worrying if the damage has already been done.

"We have been overwhelmed with calls," said Charlotte Brody, executive director of Health Care Without Harm, one of three environmental groups that sponsored the study, called "Not Too Pretty," along with Coming Clean and The Environmental Working Group.

"Some people were cleaning out their medicine cabinets and wondering if the bottles were safe to recycle. Others wanted affirmation of a diagnosis, who said, 'I worked in a hair salon 25 years ago, and my son is having a hard time making a baby. Do you think this could be a cause?' The honest answer is, I don't know."

Neither does anyone else. In fact, it is hard for the average consumer to find out if the chemical is even in a product. Of the 52 highly popular brand-name products found to contain phthalates out of a total of 72 items tested in the study, only one listed a phthalate on the label. Although the US Food and Drug Administration requires ingredients to be listed on cosmetic labels, one loophole in the law allows fragrances to go unlisted. Because most personal-care products contain some degree of fragrance, they often contain phthalates but rarely mention them on their labels.

Asked why fragrances are exempt, Dr. Linda Katz, director of the FDA's Office of Cosmetics and Colors, said, "I don't know." Asked what levels of phthalates are present in cosmetics, another FDA spokesman said

the agency does not know because it has not tested any of the products. The FDA would only test a cosmetic if it received complaints about it. And they never have. Until now.

Phthalates are everywhere. They are in shower curtains, wallpaper, vinyl flooring, raincoats, detergents, and hundreds of other household items. In cosmetics, they serve largely as plasticizers that keep nail polish from cracking and hair spray from becoming too stiff.

Some studies, which have been done only on animals, have shown they may damage several organs, in particular the developing male-reproductive system. Some disorders - like hypospadias, a deformity of the penis, and undescended testicles - have become increasingly common nationwide and some researchers wonder if there may be an environmental cause.

Manufacturers have long dismissed alarm over phthalates, saying they have been used for decades with no reliable evidence of ill effects. The American Chemistry Council's Web site, in fact, says that the "Not Too Pretty" report revealed that phthalates were used in such small amounts in cosmetics, that, "Rather than scaring women, this report should reassure women that they can continue to confidently use beauty products containing phthalates."

Nonetheless, the FDA has called for a review of the principal phthalates used in cosmetics - known by the chemical names of dibutylphthalate, diethylphthalate, and dimethylphthalate - which have not been assessed for 17 years. Although officials took note of the recent report, the agency has been moved more by the work of the Centers for Disease Control, which has found the widespread presence of phthalates in humans. A 2001 study found the chemical present in virtually every one evaluated, while an earlier report found the level of dibutylphthalate, which is used in nail polish, in women ages 20 to 40 to be nearly 50 percent higher than the rest of the group. The CDC is conducting a larger study in an effort to track down the source of those phthalates, but spokesmen for the agency, as well as the FDA's Katz, say that, in the meantime, they don't feel women should worry about using their cosmetics.

"I am not telling my wife not to wear nail polish or anything like that," declared Dr. Jim Pirkle, deputy director for science at the CDC's environmental health laboratory, which is conducting the studies. "We are still researching it."

All of which has left a lot of women staring in dismay at the shelves in their pharmacy.

Like many of them, Judy Robinson, 32, of Jamaica Plain, was horrified to find five of her favorite personal-care items, including her beloved Nivea body cream, on the "Not Too Pretty" list. She immediately switched to what she believes are phthalate-free alternatives out of concern for the children she hopes to one day have.

"This is a call to arms for women who are concerned about their children and their own ability to raise healthy children while using products from the corner store," Robinson said. "It is an issue we can all get behind to get these chemicals out of these products."

Susanne Green, 34, a legislative assistant on Capitol Hill, did not find many of her favorite products on the list. But she found enough. Green, who is five months pregnant, has stopped wearing toe nail polish. Her bottle of Channel No. 5 sits untouched on the bathroom shelf. She switched to an organic makeup, "whatever that is," said Green, who used to work for the Environmental Working Group. And when she goes to the store she reads labels as much as she shops.

"It's a lifestyle change," said Green. "I used to buy anything. Now I look at all the labels. My feeling is if I can make these purchasing changes, then it is better for me and my child. And I think I will keep using them."

Finding phthalate-free alternatives is not altogether easy. Although the "Not Too Pretty" report listed a number of such items, because many products apparently do not list phthalates, or use words that are not recognizable to consumers, some women are unsure just what is safe to use.

The groups that sponsored the report have asked the FDA to require that phthalates in cosmetics be labeled and have called upon manufacturers to develop products that do not contain phthalates.

"What is so frustrating to me is that in a world of unsolvable problems, this one seems most solvable," said Brody. "If the same company makes a hair spray with the toxin and another one without, why can't they make all products without it?"

Katz declined to comment on the "Not Too Pretty" report, saying, "if there is something to be concerned about, we will obviously let the public know about it." But there is some indication that the FDA is already concerned about some phthalates.

In recent months, the agency has issued two advisories on the subject of DEHP (di-2-ethylhexyl-phthalate), a phthalate used as a softener in medical devices made of polyvinyl chloride, such as intravenous fluid bags, tubing, and blood bags.

The first recommended that alternative products be used in medical procedures involving developing males, in light of the animal studies, while the second suggested that plastics containing the chemical, which have been found to leach from the material, be labeled.

All of which leaves mothers like Devon Moser wondering whether it is safe to keep breastfeeding her youngest child, a 15-month-old boy.

Although she has been told that phthalates disappear rapidly from the human body, and that nursing is safe to do, she is not reassured. She has switched to a phthalate-free nail polish. She wears virtually none of her beloved perfumes. She pores over labels. And she worries about her son.

"I think I have an internal denial mechanism so I tell myself if I don't see it on the label, then it's probably not there," Moser said. "But I know that's not true."