



<http://www.sciencenews.org/view/generic/id/2939>

[Home](#) / [News](#) / July 20th, 2002; Vol.162 #3 / [News item](#)

MORE THAN SKIN DEEP? BEAUTY PRODUCTS MAY DAMAGE FETAL DEVELOPMENT

By **John Pickrell**

July 17th, 2002

A new report shows that many cosmetics contain phthalates --a class of chemicals known to cause developmental deformities in animals. The report, from three environmental-advocacy groups, recommends that women of childbearing age avoid using these products.

The study finds that many beauty products--including some deodorants, fragrances, lotions, and hair sprays--contain phthalates but that most omit the chemicals from the ingredients lists.

Phthalates are used industrially as solvents and also as softeners to make plastics more flexible, and they're commonly found in food wrap, paint, medical supplies, pesticides, and nail polish.

Pressure to look into phthalates' effects on health has been growing. Recent animal tests have shown that the chemicals can damage the developing male reproductive system (SN: 9/2/00, p. 152: <http://www.sciencenews.org/20000902/bob1.asp>; 9/9/00, p. 165: <http://www.sciencenews.org/20000909/fob3.asp>).

Also, researchers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta have detected relatively high quantities of dibutyl phthalate in the urine of young women. "The finger of suspicion has pointed at cosmetics," says Paul Foster of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences in Research Triangle Park, N.C.

Three lobbying groups--Health Care Without Harm and Environmental Working Group, both in Washington, D.C., and Coming Clean of Missoula, Mont. --set out to examine the link. The groups contracted STAT Analysis Corporation in Chicago to test consumer products for five phthalates. That exercise revealed that 52 of 72 products examined contain at least one of the phthalates. They ranged from trace amounts to 3 percent of the product. The groups released the findings on July 10.

By claiming the chemicals are fragrances or that they're trade secrets, companies can legally keep phthalates off ingredient lists, the report says.

The Cosmetics, Toiletry and Fragrance Association in Washington, D.C., admits that phthalates are in its members' products but argues that they're safe. An association statement cites data assessed in 1985. The statement adds that some phthalates are constituents of fragrances, which can have hundreds of ingredients, so they can't practically be listed on labels.

Though there has been no study of human-health effects of phthalates, damage has "been repeatedly shown in animals," says Ted Schettler, a physician at Boston Medical Center who works with the lobbying groups. Schettler adds that the greatest risk in people is probably to the male fetus, but exposure might also affect prepubertal boys.

"It's reasonable to be concerned," says L. Earl Gray of the Environmental Protection Agency in Research Triangle Park, N.C. However, he says, it's difficult to know at this stage whether phthalate concentrations in cosmetics present a significant risk. Gray notes that phthalates are particularly abundant in medical devices, such as tubing, and that these probably present a higher risk than cosmetics do.

In a related announcement, the Food and Drug Administration issued a statement last week recommending that health-care providers limit male fetuses' and boys' exposure to di-2-ethylhexyl-phthalate, which is a common softener in medical devices made of polyvinyl chloride.

"Some of the highest phthalate levels recorded are from babies" in intensive care, says Foster. "It makes sense to find substitute materials."