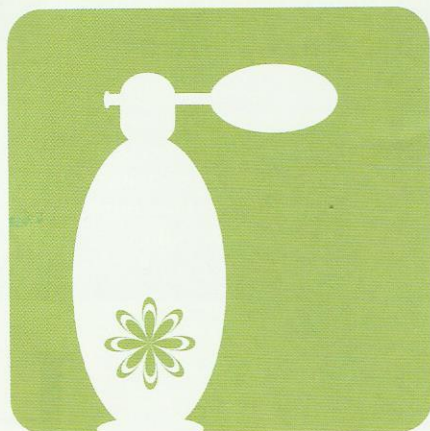


# Behind the label

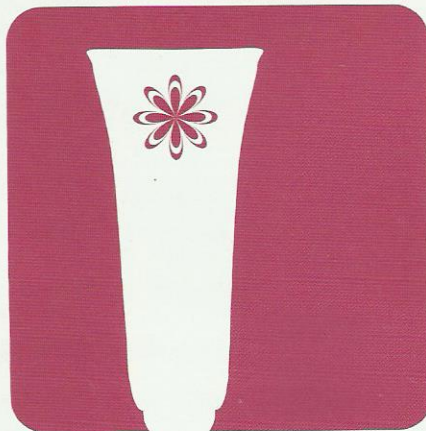
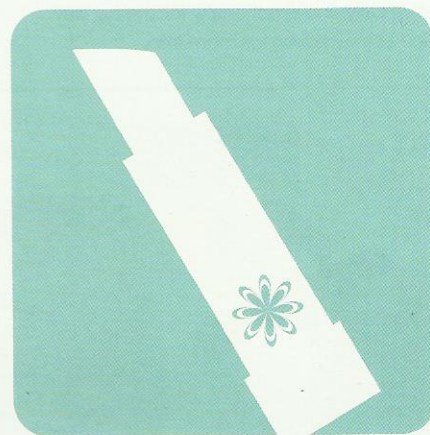
Lucy Corkhill examines our culture's obsession with beauty products and discovers what's really lurking behind the fancy packaging

**T**he latest buzzword of the multi-billion pound beauty industry is 'natural'. The big corporations have picked up on the trend for a healthier and more natural approach to life and begun to market thousands of products with misleading information, including the use of the word 'organic' on packaging. The truth is, there is very little that is natural in most of these products, and plenty of ingredients that are downright dangerous. Unlike other chemical-reliant industries, the cosmetics and toiletries sector remains self-regulated, with firms responsible for testing their own products and informing consumers. A cosmetics product labeled 'organic' may contain only 1% organic ingredients. It is estimated that women who use mainstream cosmetic products apply as many as 175 different chemicals to their bodies every day, according to [chemicalsafeskin.co.uk](http://chemicalsafeskin.co.uk). Richard Bence, a biochemist who has spent three years researching conventional products, said, "We really need to start questioning the products we are putting on our skin and not just assume that the chemicals in them are safe. We have no idea what these chemicals do when they are mixed together, the effect could be much greater than the sum of the individual parts." Most popular beauty products contain a vast cocktail of chemicals, many of which have been linked to health problems such as cancer, hormone imbalances and skin irritation. A campaign group organized by manufacturers of natural products is calling for mainstream cosmetics makers to exhibit more information on their products' ingredients, as well as the side effects of such ingredients. When choosing what to put on your skin, it pays to scan the ingredients and do your research. Here are a few of the common ingredients in beauty products that it is best to avoid:



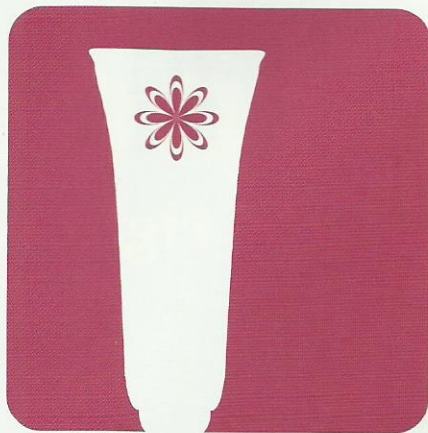
**Phthalates** Phthalates are a group of chemicals used as solvents and fixatives, found in hair spray, deodorant, nail polish and perfume. Phthalates can damage the liver, the kidneys, the lungs and the reproductive system. In 2001, the European Union classified phthalates as substances "toxic to reproduction". The Women's Environmental Network (WEN) states: "Chemicals that cause birth defects do not belong in products marketed for personal or house-hold use. While the levels of phthalates in some individual products were low, people are being exposed to phthalates from many different products each day."

**Parabens** It is estimated that around 99% of beauty products contain synthetic preservatives called parabens. As well as causing skin irritation, rashes, dermatitis, and allergic reactions, parabens mimic the female hormone oestrogen. New research undertaken by the University of Reading found high concentrations of parabens in 18 out of 20 breast tumours. The Journal of Applied Toxicology, which published the research, said, 'from this research it is not possible to say whether parabens actually caused these tumours, but they may certainly be associated with the overall rise in breast cancer cases.'



**Sodium laurel sulphate (SLS)** Research suggests that 90% of beauty products, ranging from shampoo to toothpaste, use a detergent called sodium dodecylsulfate (SDS), also known as sodium laurel sulphate (SLS), sodium lauryl sulphate or sodium laureth sulphate (SLES) as a foaming agent. A solution of just 2% SLS can increase skin thickness, cause irritation, inflammation, and increase other forms of immune activity in the skin. Some shampoos contain more than 50% SLS! Other research suggests that SLS and SLES may cause potentially carcinogenic nitrates and dioxins to form in shampoos and cleansers by reacting with other commonly used chemical ingredients.





**Formaldehyde** Most of us think of embalming fluid when we hear the word formaldehyde, but this toxic chemical pops up in aqueous cosmetic formulations such as shampoo, conditioner, shower gel, liquid hand wash and bubble bath, including products aimed at babies and children. Frequent use can cause dryness, cracking, dermatitis, itching and blisters.



### MEA, DEA & TEA

(monoethanolamine) (diethanolamine), (triethanolamine) These hormone-disrupting chemicals can form cancer-causing nitrates. Dr. Samuel Epstein, Professor of Environmental Health at the University of Illinois, reports that repeated applications of DEA-based detergents result in increases in liver cancer and kidney cancer.

**“We really need to start questioning the products we put on our skin and not just assume that the chemicals in them are safe”.**



**Fragrance or ‘parfum’** This innocent-sounding ingredient can contain literally thousands of chemicals, many toxic or carcinogenic. Synthetic scents, typically made up of chemicals derived from petroleum, can cause headaches, dizziness, allergic reactions, coughing, vomiting and skin irritation. Fragrances can also affect the nervous system, triggering irritability and hyperactivity. Of the thousands of chemicals used in fragrance, only a few have been safety tested.



**Propylene glycol** Commonly used in anti-freeze and brake fluid, propylene glycol finds its way into many moisturisers and hand and body lotions as an emulsifier and solvent. As your bottle of anti-freeze will tell you, this chemical is acknowledged as a dangerous neurotoxin and is readily absorbed through the skin. It has been linked to contact dermatitis, kidney damage and liver abnormalities. It also inhibits skin cell growth, damaging cell membranes and causing rashes and dry skin.

### What you can do:

**Go to [ewg.org](http://ewg.org)** and check out the health risks of your favourite products. The Environmental Working Group (EWG) has compiled a guide of 7,500 beauty products, ranked according to their potential to cause cancer, trigger allergic reactions, interfere with the hormonal system, impair reproduction or damage a developing foetus.

**Always check the ingredients** of any beauty product before you buy – don’t be taken in by rustic-looking packaging and/or ‘organic’ or ‘natural’ labelling.

**Beware of umbrella terms** such as ‘parfum’, which can actually contain a host of chemical nasties.

**Less is more** when it comes to beauty products. Check your bathroom – do you really need those eye creams, body lotions, hair serums, super shampoos etc.? Organic coconut oil keeps skin soft and sweet-smelling. Try a drop of your favourite essential oil as a perfume.

**Make your own products** – then you can be sure of what they contain!

**When buying products for babies**, whose skin is thinner and more absorbent, always go for the simplest, natural products, preferably those registered organic with a reputable governing body like the Soil Association. Babies really don’t need a whole host of lotions and potions. Water is fine for babies and young children.

**Support smaller companies** who don’t test on animals and who wear their principles on their sleeve.

**Educate friends and family.** Buy organic toiletries as gifts.

**Avoid toxic bleaching agents** and chemicals by using natural menstrual products. See [fannyfanackapants.co.uk](http://fannyfanackapants.co.uk).

**Visit [safecosmetics.org](http://safecosmetics.org)** to read about their campaign to ban chemicals.

**Ensure no animal testing.** See [buav.org](http://buav.org) for a comprehensive list of who really doesn’t use animal testing in their products or ingredients.

### Further reading

The Beauty Myth by *Naomi Wolf*  
Cosmetics Unmasked  
by Dr. Stephen and Gina Antczak  
[baresatsuma.com](http://baresatsuma.com) [wen.org.uk](http://wen.org.uk)