

Skin Deep



When it comes to staying healthy this summer, what you put on your skin might be just as important as what you put in your mouth.

By Jennifer Chen

BEFORE HITTING THE BEACH THIS SUMMER, many women will likely slather on a healthy dose of sunscreen, apply a fresh coat of lipstick, or experiment with a new shade of eyeshadow—and in the process layer about 160 chemicals onto their faces. Many women's daily beauty regimen exposes them to a vast array of chemicals, while men on average use about 80 different compounds. Since the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) legal authority over cosmetics is different than other products it regulates, it can be hard to know exactly what harm these ingredients might do to our bodies. According to the FDA's website, "Cosmetic products and ingredients are not subject to FDA premarket approval authority, with the exception of color additives." The federal law overseeing cosmetics is more than 70 years old, and contains major loopholes that allow the \$50 billion US beauty industry to put unlimited amounts of chemicals into cosmetics without any testing or inspections before the products are marketed to the public. The only organization that tests the so-called safety of these products is the Cosmetic Ingredient Review, a self-policing industry panel that in its 35-year history has evaluated less than 15 percent of the ingredients used in beauty products, and has found nine ingredients that are unsafe. Beauty companies are not required to release ingredient data or even register with the FDA. Instead, the FDA runs a Voluntary Cosmetic Registration

Program that simply encourages companies to sign up.

One example of the arduous FDA regulation process is the decades-in-the-making evaluation of a summertime essential, sunscreen. The FDA is just now finalizing rules after initial promises to regulate it in 1978. In May 2010, the Environmental Working Group tested more than 500 sunscreen products and recommends a mere eight percent of those tested. The low

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approval rate stems from a recent surge of high SPF numbers on sunscreens, lulling consumers into staying out in the sun longer, increasing the chances of skin cancer. The best sun protection? Clothing, a hat, and shade. The FDA is currently investigating a key ingredient called retinyl palmitate, a form of vitamin A found in 41 percent of sunscreens, to see if it may actually increase skin damage. Another harmful ingredient—the hormone-disrupting oxybenzone—appeared in 60 percent of the 500 sunscreens tested. The FDA says it may begin regulating sunscreens in October, but will give manufacturers at least a year to comply with new restrictions or regulations. This means federally regulated sunscreens won't hit the market until summer 2012 at the earliest.

Defining Natural

Many companies tout their beauty products as natural, but without any regulations, it is difficult to know if these claims are true. Even companies known for their eco-friendliness struggle with providing all-natural ingredients: Cruelty-free beauty giant Aveda, which is in the process of phasing parabens (see sidebar) out of its current formulas, is searching for plant-based alternatives. US-based Neutrogena

Naturals products contain synthetic fragrances, which might cause hormone disruption. Two popular Brazilian blowout companies that develop hair-straightening products have been found to have dangerous levels of formaldehyde (a known carcinogen) after a Portland, Ore., hair-salon stylist complained of headaches, difficulty breathing, and nose bleeds after using the products on her clients. The stylist took samples of the blowout product to Oregon Health and Science University's Center for Research on Occupational and Environmental Toxicology testing, which revealed levels of formaldehyde between 4.85 to 10.60 percent in a product that claims to be formaldehyde-free.

The problem becomes two-fold with the rise