

MCS/ES Info

An update on Cosmetic Ingredients

We are all aware that we need to check what is in our cosmetics and beauty products but a recent study showed that this is even more imperative, particularly after Brexit.

This article written by CHEM Trust explains more.

A recent comparative study on cosmetics highlights the importance of knowing what chemicals are in the products you are buying, particularly when shopping online.

The global study from the Danish Consumer Council THINK Chemicals has found that cosmetic products can contain unwanted chemicals, including allergenic substances and substances that are suspected of being endocrine disruptors. They also found that 'identical' cosmetic products from the same brands can contain different chemicals depending on which country they are marketed in.

In Spring 2020, the Danish Consumer Council THINK Chemicals asked 33 NGOs from six continents, including CHEM Trust, to send the ingredients lists of 39 cosmetic products on sale in their country, including lotions, mascara, shampoo, hair dyes and sun creams.

CHEM Trust sent the ingredient lists of 28 products sold in the UK to be reviewed by the Danish Consumer Council. The other 11 products out of the 39 selected were not found for sale from UK-based shops or online stores.

Unwanted chemicals present in products

The Danish Consumer Council THINK Chemicals checked whether the products contained unwanted chemicals, and ranked them 'A', 'B' or 'C' based on their contents. Note that this assessment was done by checking the ingredients lists on each product, not by a chemical analysis.

They classify unwanted chemicals as those that either are or are suspected of being: endocrine disruptors, allergenic, carcinogenic, toxic to reproduction, or environmentally harmful (such as being persistent in nature, or accumulating in the environment, or in animals). The following rating is described in the study methodology:

- 'A' – The product is a good choice. It does not contain a number of problematic substances.
- 'B' – The product is free from a number of problematic substances, but it contains perfume or substances that may affect the environment. You may choose to avoid the B products if you want to minimize the risk of fragrance allergy and take maximum account of the environment.
- 'C' – The product contains problematic substances, e.g. substances suspected of being endocrine disrupting. The substances are usually permitted for use and each product is not harmful in itself, but they contribute to your overall exposure to problematic substances.

Results

In November 2020 the Danish Consumer Council THINK Chemicals published a report 'Cosmetics worldwide – same contents?', which presented their findings.

The majority of products received a C-rating, meaning they contain one or more unwanted chemicals. 20 of the 28 products surveyed from the UK were rated 'C'.

In total, the 39 products contained 65 different unwanted chemicals. 23 of the 65 chemicals are substances that are suspected of being endocrine disrupters, of damaging fertility or of damaging the unborn child.

Many of the other unwanted chemicals can cause allergies or are problematic for the environment. Cosmetics with unwanted chemicals were found in all of the participating countries, including in the UK.

The Danish Consumer Council THINK Chemicals sent the preliminary results of the research to representatives of the brands in Denmark, and their responses can be found in the report.

They also found that products came in many different versions worldwide and want consumers to be aware that a cosmetic product they normally buy in their own country may not necessarily be the same when you shop on holiday or online.

Chemical mixtures

Throughout our lives we are exposed to hundreds of chemicals from multiple sources, such as from food, consumer products, household dust and drinking water. This is a problem because we are not exposed to chemicals one at a time. Also, some chemicals such as endocrine disruptors can have negative impacts even at very low levels. Combined exposure to chemicals (a 'mixture' of chemicals) can lead to harmful effects, even if single substances in the mixture are below their individual safety levels.

The new EU Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability includes a commitment to introduce provisions to tackle chemical mixtures in relevant legislation. CHEM Trust has called for action to address exposure to chemical mixtures for many years and is working to ensure that the Commission takes swift action to better protect human health and ecosystems from harmful combination effects.

Reduce your risk of exposure to unwanted or harmful chemicals

The EU and UK must develop strong legislation so that these 'unwanted' chemicals are not present in consumer products in the first place. Until such legislation exists, the Danish Consumer Council THINK Chemicals states that it is crucial:

- That consumers have access to and review the ingredients before buying the products.
- To be aware that products with the same names and bar codes in neighbouring countries may differ in contents. Even within one country, products can be different.
- That consumers are aware that the everyday products they buy can contain unwanted substances. They have put together a list of unwanted chemicals to look out for and avoid in the cosmetics you use. (you can find the list web link in the reference section below).

Eleanor Hawke from CHEM Trust said:

"It is alarming but unfortunately not surprising that products such as cosmetics have chemicals in them that have hormone disrupting properties. These chemicals are still allowed in consumer products here in the UK, even though the harmful impact of hormone disrupting chemicals has been known for more than 20 years. To safeguard the health of ourselves and future generations the UK government must adopt a plan for how it is going to minimise our exposure to hormone disrupting chemicals, including not allowing them to be used in everyday products such as cosmetics."

References:

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