

## Beware of the price you may pay for beauty

Ingredients in perfumes, hair treatments and makeup can lead to skin problems

By Maureen McDonald / Special to The Detroit News

After a virulent case of acne erupted on Lisa Tolnai's face in the late 1990s, she couldn't find a single makeup -- from Mary Kay to Estee Lauder -- that didn't irritate her skin, despite the "hypoallergenic," "botanical" or "sensitive skin" labels.

Frustrated by her desire to look beautiful, Tolnai, 38, a Grosse Pointe Park nursing student, began picking at her pimples to the degree she became diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder.

"I pretty much stopped using every over-the-counter product except Neutrogena," Tolnai says. While the U.S. Food and Drug Administration says most cosmetics are safe if used correctly, dermatologists and allergists report minor skin, scalp and lung irritations abound. The most notorious culprit arises from a group of petrochemicals called phthalates that make the scent of perfume linger longer or hold the color in hair dye after weeks of washing.

Some phthalates have been banned by the European Union and held under scrutiny by legislatures in Massachusetts, New York and California because of known or suspected toxic reactions. Any of the 10,500 chemical ingredients in the \$35 billion cosmetics industry could cause an adverse reaction, prompting consumers to pay closer attention to what they buy and how it applies.

Here in Michigan, the biggest concerns dermatologists report come from contact dermatitis and allergic reactions to the skin and scalp, says Dana Sachs, associate professor of dermatology at the University of Michigan Medical School. The body's immune system overreacts to an irritant or allergen, expressing a sense of being invaded. In some cases, hair falls out in clumps, skin breaks out in pimples or sinuses become congested.

"Word of contact dermatitis (acute or chronic skin inflammation resulting from contact with an irritating substance or allergen) is way underreported," Sachs says. Instead of reporting the problem to a doctor, "You put on a product, it makes your face break out, you throw it out and get something else."

Meanwhile, dermatologists face the challenge of identifying what caused the reaction and then choosing a course of treatment, particularly in three main areas: fragrance, hair and skin care products.

### The scrutiny

Products consumers use to soothe, beautify and protect the body could cause harm, whether it is itchy, watering eyes, blotchy skin or scaly scalp. In rare cases, some



Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

**Lisa Tolnai, who had bad reactions to a wide variety of cosmetic lines, finally got help from a dermatologist.**

### Banned products

The FDA lists numerous products on its Web site, [www.cfsan.fda.gov](http://www.cfsan.fda.gov), which are prohibited or restricted by regulation. Here's a sampling:

- Hexachlorophene: This preservative has a neurotoxic effect and an ability to penetrate human skin.
- Mercury compounds: Some eye cosmetics contain mercury, a substance that penetrates the skin and tends to accumulate in the body.
- Chlorofluorocarbon propellants: Some cosmetic aerosol products are prohibited.
- Bithionol: May contain photo-contact sensitization.
- Halogenated salicylanilides: May also cause photocontact sensitization.
- Chloroform: Contains an animal carcinogenicity it could be hazardous to humans.
- Vinyl chloride: Has carcinogenic properties when used as an ingredient in aerosol products.
- Zirconium-containing complexes: Could have a toxic effect on lungs.
- Methylene chloride: Could be poisonous when used in cosmetic fingernail preparations.

### Learn more

- [The FDA](#) maintains an entire section on cosmetics with practical information and listing of banned or restricted products.
- The Cosmetic Ingredient Review,

products could cause cancer or sterility, according to the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics.

Recently, 116 cosmetics and personal-care product manufacturers, including L'Oreal and Estee Lauder, signed an agreement with the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics to remove ingredients known to be carcinogens, mutagens and reproductive toxins. Last fall, the European Union signed into law an amendment that requires the beauty industry to ban certain phthalates and other chemicals from products. What appears on a label to contain rose petals and lavender extract may have a host of other chemicals in its formula.

"Commonly-used ingredients that pose such risks include formaldehyde, coal tar, lead acetate, silica, propylene glycol, sodium lauryl sulphate and p-phenylenediamine," says Kevin Donegan of the Breast Cancer Fund in San Francisco, which teams up with the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics ( [www.safecosmetics.org](http://www.safecosmetics.org)).

How do patients know what chemical or compound out of the 10,500 possible ingredients makes their skin break out or their lungs wheeze? Sachs says physicians must identify the triggers that cause the immune system to become distressed.

"Patch testing can assess what kind of natural or chemical compounds cause allergic contact dermatitis," Sachs says. Most common symptoms are redness, scaling and itching.

The dermatologist -- also the allergist -- applies a couple of strips to the skin, each one with 10 different compounds that reflect the most common allergens -- fragrance, hair dye or rubber mix.

The American Lung Association recommends people who frequently have reactions to cosmetics keep an asthma diary. Once people know their triggers, they need to cut down exposure.

## Fuming over perfume

Fragrance is one cause of skin irritation, Sachs says. More than 3,000 different fragrances are used in perfumes and skin products in hundreds of chemical combinations, according to the American Academy of Dermatology.

One of the most notable cases of perfume sensitivity hit the newsstands last month when Erin Weber, a former radio host at WYCD-FM (99.5), found she was so sickened by a colleague's use of Lancome's Tresor she lost her voice, suffered mental anguish and took lengthy absences from work. She required medical treatment to restore her health.

Because she was fired for excessive absences, Weber filed suit against her employer. In late May, the radio host won a \$10.6 million judgment in federal court against the station and its parent company, Infinity Broadcast System.

Beyond the rose and lilac aromas in Tresor are hundreds of chemical combinations, including the most controversial, diethyl phthalate. While the Washington, D.C.-based Environmental Working Group's "Skin Deep" report seeks to ban nearly all petrochemicals because of known or suspected harm, the American Chemical Council asserts the products are entirely safe.

Sachs agrees with the council, noting the recently published reports of cancer from phthalates in laboratory rats are akin to the saccharine scare in the 1980s.

"Carcinogenicity is unlikely in such small amounts," she says. "The amount we consume in daily life is not a real issue." How do people with perfume sensitivity suffer? The Job Accommodations Network, a division of the U.S. Department of Labor, says common side effects are headache, dizziness, fatigue, nausea, breathing difficulties, tightening of the throat and difficulty concentrating.

[www.cir-safety.org](http://www.cir-safety.org), reviews and assesses ingredient safety data and cites warnings against certain chemicals on its Web site.

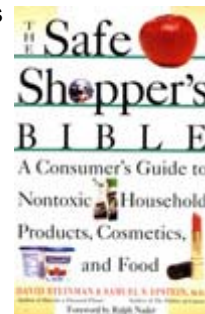
- [The Environmental Working Group](#), conducted its own survey on cosmetic ingredients and provides assessments on 7,500 commonly used products.

### Books

- "The Safe Shopper's Bible: A Consumer's Guide to Nontoxic Household Products, Cosmetics and Food" by Dr. Samuel Epstein and Samuel Steinman (Wiley, \$10.85 on Amazon.com)

- "Dying to Look Good, The Disturbing Truth about What's Really in Your Cosmetics, Toiletries and Personal Care Products" by Christine Hoza Farlow (Kiss of Health Publishing, \$10.95)

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The best course of treatment is avoiding contact with individuals who wear the offending fragrance, suggests Carol Christner, spokeswoman for the American Lung Association of Michigan. Allergists can treat cases with nasal sprays, over-the-counter antihistamines or, in the worst cases, inhalers. The Environmental Working Group ( [www.ewg.org/reports/skindeep](http://www.ewg.org/reports/skindeep)) issued recommendations for high- and low-risk perfumes. Among the most safe brands were Burberry Weekend for men, and Clinique Happy Perfume Spray for women.

## **Hair-care disasters**

A routine trip to the hair salon for color highlights became a living nightmare for Chrystal Roberts of Oak Park. The 48-year-old director of community relations for Health Alliance Plan found a brand of bleach reacted adversely with her fragile mane, causing almost half her hair to fall out.

Her dermatologist, Dr. Diane Jackson-Richards of Henry Ford Health System, says African-American women suffer more hair and scalp ailments than other ethnic groups because harsh chemicals often are used to straighten their hair.

"Women develop folliculitis from overprocessing their hair with relaxers, lye and hot combs," she says. On the FDA Web site ( [www.cfsan.fda.gov](http://www.cfsan.fda.gov)), the regulatory agency warns that hair straighteners and dyes are tops on the consumer complaint list. Some people suffer from scalp blisters, hair damage or hair that falls out in clumps, Jackson-Richards says.

The FDA removed numerous dye products from the market and required manufacturers to print labels warning of skin irritation. It recommends people conduct a patch test on the skin before applying it to the whole scalp.

Jackson-Richards advises patients to stop dyeing or relaxing their hair, letting nature take its course. She applied injections of intralesional cortisone in Robert's scalp for a full year, prompting some restoration of hair.

"This doesn't work for all people," she says. "I wouldn't want readers to make an assumption that an injection will be the cure for all their hair loss."

Roberts also made lifestyle changes to reduce stress and restore her hair. "Dr. Jackson (Richards) told me not to sleep on rollers because it cuts off circulation to my scalp," Roberts says. "I'd worn rollers to bed almost my whole life."

## **Sensitive skin**

Consumers concerned about allergic skin reactions from cosmetics must understand that no product is guaranteed to avoid allergic reactions, according to the FDA. Even products labeled "hypoallergenic" vary widely because the manufacturers themselves carry out tests to validate the claim.

"I had a little retail store in my bathroom. Everything was too oily or too itchy," says Tolnai of Grosse Pointe Park.

She visited several dermatologists before a friend referred her to Dr. Steven Grekin, who has offices in Warren and Wyandotte.

Grekin took computerized pictures of her acne and taught her more about proper cleansing. "I'd scrubbed my face too hard. I needed to be gentler on my skin."

The most common symptoms of skin irritants are swelling, scaling and itchy face or scalp, Grekin says. The eyelids are the most sensitive. He recommends people don't apply makeup or moisturizer above the cheekbone or on the eyes if they suffer irritation.

Treatment may be as simple as learning proper cleansing techniques and experimenting with hypoallergenic makeup.

"We're all at the mercy of our genetic constitution," Grekin says. "We all fall victim to the ruthless effects of life's physical, emotional, and environmental stresses."

As Tolnai's skin improved, and she found her outlook improved as well. She even enrolled in nursing school to help others get well.

"I like the face I see in my mirror," Tolnai says.

*Maureen McDonald is a Metro Detroit freelance writer.*