

# What you need to know about toxics in your cosmetic products *(reprinted from the David Suzuki Foundation)*

What comes to mind when you think of pollution? Probably not your shampoo, soap or hand lotion. But some of the chemicals found in personal care products aren't that pretty.

U.S. researchers identified 10,500 industrial chemicals used as cosmetic ingredients, including carcinogens, pesticides, reproductive toxics, endocrine disruptors, plasticizers, degreasers and surfactants.



In the spring of 2010, the David Suzuki Foundation invited Canadians to pull back the shower curtain and participate in an online survey about toxic ingredients in cosmetics. We asked participants to check ingredient lists for 12 sets of chemicals — a Dirty Dozen ingredients linked to health and environmental concerns, including cancer, reproductive disorders, asthma and severe allergies.

The report *What's inside? That counts: A survey of toxic ingredients in our cosmetics* summarizes key findings from the survey, highlights weaknesses in Canada's legal framework governing toxic chemicals in cosmetics, and outlines recommendations for strengthening laws and regulations to better protect human health and the environment.

More than 6,200 individuals participated in our survey, providing information for more than 12,500 personal care products. The results are disturbing.

## Survey results

- Almost 80 per cent of products reportedly contained at least one of the Dirty Dozen ingredients;
- More than half of all products reportedly contained multiple Dirty Dozen ingredients;
- Participants were unable to locate ingredient lists on more than 1,000 products.

Equally disturbing, loopholes in Canada's cosmetic ingredient labelling requirements result in incomplete ingredient lists on many products. Notably, manufacturers are not required to disclose specific fragrance ingredients on the product label. Instead, the generic term *parfum* is listed, representing a mysterious mixture of potentially dozens of chemicals.

Also, personal care products regulated as "drugs" on the basis of therapeutic claims (e.g., tartar-fighting toothpaste, bacteria-killing cleansers, face cream with sun protection) are not subject to the cosmetic ingredient labelling requirements.

Notwithstanding these loopholes, cosmetics are the only type of product, other than food, for which Canadian consumers are afforded the right to know about chemical ingredients. As a result, consumers can seek to avoid at least some toxic chemicals in their toiletries — and many do. Three out of five participants indicated that they check the ingredient list before buying personal care products. But survey results signal how difficult it can be, even for the conscientious shopper, to avoid chemicals of concern. "Buyer beware" is inadequate when it comes to protecting human health and the environment from unnecessary toxic exposures. Government has a role to play in requiring more user-friendly ingredient lists and keeping harmful chemicals out of our products in the first place. Ninety-eight per cent of survey participants agreed that Canada's cosmetic laws should be strengthened.

## **Loopholes in Canada's Cosmetics Laws**

- Manufacturers are not required to disclose specific fragrance ingredients on the product label. Instead, the generic term parfum is listed, representing a mixture of potentially dozens of chemicals.
- Products regulated as "drugs" on the basis of therapeutic claims (e.g., tartar-fighting toothpaste, bacteria-killing cleansers, face cream with sun protection) are only required to list 'active' ingredients, not complete list as required for products regulated as cosmetics.
- Although most ingredients in cosmetics have never been tested for their effects on human health and the environment, Health Canada does not require pre-market testing of chemicals used in cosmetics.
- Under Canada's Cosmetic Regulations, manufacturers are required to disclose the concentration of each ingredient in their product to the Minister of Health, but this information is not made public.
- Chemicals that are prohibited or restricted may still be present in cosmetics as byproducts or impurities
- Manufacturers are not required to disclose specific fragrance chemicals in the list of ingredients
- Products marketed as "fragrance-free" or "unscented" may contain fragrance ingredients, in the form of masking agents that prevent the brain from perceiving odour.

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