

Are Your Beauty Products Killing You?

By Matt Wheeland, AlterNet. Posted July 4, 2002.

□ A new report linking birth defects and health risks with a chemical used in trendy cosmetics, gives a long overdue wake-up call to the FDA, consumers and the beauty industry.

□ If you got out of the shower this morning, blow-dried your hair and gave your 'do a spritz of VO5 hairspray, you've just poisoned yourself a little bit. If you do this every morning as your regular routine, you are accumulating these poisons by the bucketful.

□ But it's not just VO5 that could make you sick. Try Secret Sheer Dry deodorant, or the suitably named Poison, a perfume by Christian Dior. In fact, 52 popular cosmetics are now proven to have toxic components in varying concentrations -- and they're all over the place.

□ A report released jointly July 10 by Coming Clean, the Environmental Working Group and Health Care Without Harm details the extent to which a toxic family of chemicals known as phthalates (THAY-lates) are used in everyday household products, especially beauty products like nail polish, lipstick and perfumes.

□ The report, titled "Not Too Pretty: Pthalates, Beauty Products and the FDA," has its basis in a 1999 FDA study of toxins in the general population of the U.S. From a sample of 1,029 people, every one of them tested positive for phthalates in their blood or urine. □ Scientists at the Centers for Disease Control singled out a subgroup of 289 people with a particularly high incidence of phthalates: women of childbearing age. These women were found to have daily exposures of phthalates ranging from 2.5 to 22 times the normal for the rest of the general population, with 5 percent showing levels of 75 percent or higher of the acceptable daily amounts.

□ Judging from the 5 percent of women with dangerously high test results, it can be assumed that every day, as many as two million women of childbearing age are exposed to toxic levels of phthalates.

□ Phthalates have been shown to cause a wide array of health problems, from liver and kidney failure to heart, lung and blood pressure problems. The most worrisome aspect by far is the phthalates' effect on the reproductive development of fetuses and infants, particularly the reproductive tracts of males.

□ Phthalates are metabolized in humans once ingested or absorbed through the skin. In pregnant women, phthalates pass through the placenta to be absorbed by the fetus. In nursing women, phthalates are found in breast milk, which means infants are ingesting these chemicals as they develop. In male fetuses -- and infants especially -- the phthalates have been shown to cause testicular atrophy and a reduced sperm count, among other serious health problems.

□ Dr. Stephen Safe of Texas A&M University notes that some in the medical community have expressed concerns about phthalate exposure and human health. "It's hard to be specific until more medical data is available," Dr. Safe says, "but if people have concerns, they should limit their use of these products."

□ The HCWH report is the first to document and link the deleterious effects of phthalates to male reproductive development. Women of childbearing age were shown to