

Fears on beauty industry chemicals

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Chemicals used in everyday cosmetics are exposing Australians to potentially serious health risks from toxic ingredients banned by other countries.

Commonly available products contain substances banned in Europe, Japan, Sweden and Saudi Arabia. They include deodorants, artificial musk and vanilla fragrances, liquid soaps, anti-ageing creams, hair straightening products, nail polish, children's bath foams and baby's skin lotions.

Face peels and exfoliants containing butylated hydroxyanisole (BHA) are sold in Australia, but the chemical was banned in Japan in 1958 after it was linked to tumours and endocrine disorders.

Recent overseas studies have highlighted the potential dangers of children's bath and personal-care products, including baby shampoos, bubble bath and baby wipes. Teenagers and pre-pubescent girls are also at risk, Friends of the Earth Australia says.

National director Cam Walker said, "We are looking at children being exposed to chemical risk from a very early age through these common products.

"We need a stronger national effort to prevent long-term health problems developing as a result of an early exposure to chemical risk that could easily be avoided."

Earlier this week, the US Department of Labor issued a hazard alert to hairdressing salons, warning of health risks associated with hair straightening products containing formaldehyde. The department has urged salons to stop using the products, warning formaldehyde can cause nasal and lung cancers.

The crackdown comes after one of America's most influential consumer advocacy groups the Environmental Working Group published an online investigation analysing 47 "adverse event" reports on hair straighteners, filed with the US Food and Drug Administration.

Last month, the Saudi Food and Drug Authority banned triclosan in cosmetics and toothpaste. It said studies showed the chemical could react with chlorinated water to produce a carcinogenic dioxin.

The Canadian Medical Association is also calling for a ban on triclosan, and it is also being reviewed by the US Environment Protection Authority.

Several hair straightening products containing unsafe levels of formaldehyde were recalled last year by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission.

The recall followed complaints from hairdressers and clients of "significant eye and throat irritation". Laboratory tests revealed one of the products, Brazilian Blowout, contained a 10 per cent concentration of free formaldehyde, "exceeding the safe legal limit by 50 times," the commission's recall letter said.

In Australia, the maximum safe level for free formaldehyde in cosmetics is 0.2 per cent, despite the World Health Organisation listing the chemical as a Group 1 carcinogen, known to cause cancer in humans. Sweden and Japan have banned formaldehyde in cosmetics and toiletries.

The European Union banned the use of phthalates in cosmetics in 2003, but a study in 2008 by the federal health department's national industrial chemicals notification and assessment scheme concluded "phthalates can be regarded as possessing low irritant and skin sensitisation potential".

The Australian chemicals assessment scheme also dismissed concerns about parabens raised by University of Reading senior oncologist Phillipa Dabre, who published a scientific paper linking parabens in deodorants to breast cancers. It said Dr Dabre's study had "established the presence of intact parabens in human breast tumours. However, this research alone is insufficient to establish that these chemicals caused the breast tumours or that the source of the chemicals was underarm cosmetics."