Hair

Dangerous Ingredients!
Some Chemicals in U.S. Cosmetics Banned in Other Countries

Ebony Vandross

BEFORE YOU READ: Share what you know about how products are regulated.

Would you use a cosmetic product on yourself after being told that the possible side effects include burns, baldness, or blindness? What about a hair product whose main ingredient was the same as the one used in drain cleaners? Would you get a relatively common and popular beauty treatment knowing the ingredients have caused it to be banned in other countries? The reality is that you or your family members have likely used products like these. Many personal care items contain ingredients that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has identified as hazardous to your health if used in excess.

Rashes, Burns, and Cancer?
The Brazilian Blowout, a popular hair treatment that is used to straighten and smooth out hair, contains an ingredient called formaldehyde. Formaldehyde is a type of carcinogen; it can cause cancer in people who breathe it in when it is in gas form. It can also cause allergic reactions. Because of these issues, products used for these treatments have been banned in places such as Europe, Canada, Australia, and Brazil. However, they are not banned in the U.S.

Under the Fair Packaging and Label Act, the FDA requires manufacturers to include labels that describe all the ingredients in their products. However, in response to health complaints from consumers and salon owners in 2011, the FDA found that manufacturers claiming their products did not contain formaldehyde in fact did contain significant amounts of it. The FDA conducted this research by testing the air in salons for formaldehyde fumes. They found that some products were not actually “formaldehyde free,” even though the company claimed that they were.

Hair dye products also contain chemicals that can cause harm if not used correctly. Hair dye manufacturers do include warning labels on their packaging. However, these warning labels may not really protect the consumer, as it is easy to make mistakes while using a product or misunderstand the directions. Additionally, ingredients found in many well-known shampoos contain chemicals that have not only proven to damage human hair, but also cause skin problems such as irritation and rashes if used in excess or incorrectly.

“No Poo” Method
When we consider all of the possible risks involved with using common hair care products, it’s no surprise that people are coming up with alternatives. The “no poo” method, which is based on washing hair with a gentler and safer alternative to shampoo, has gained popularity over the years. Some

Carcinogen
A substance that is capable of causing cancer.
common and safe ingredients you can use to wash your hair are apple cider vinegar, baking soda, and even simply water.

**Black Women at the Forefront**

In addition to finding private solutions, people are connecting in online communities to raise awareness about the dangers of some cosmetics and to fight for other kinds of changes. It is worth noting that people with curly or highly textured hair can be found at the forefront of many of these alternative hair care movements.

Many black women like me grew up using chemical relaxers in order to make our hair acceptable according to western ideals of beauty and professionalism. After years of using chemical relaxers to straighten my hair, I had suffered from burning, scalp problems, and seeing the health of my hair deteriorate. I decided to move on from the harsh chemicals and treatments I had been using. It was at this time that I discovered the natural hair movement, which is centered on informing women of African descent about the cultural history of our hair and to encourage us to embrace our hair in its natural state.

To fit in, and to gain employment opportunities and general social mobility, black women have long relied on treatments and products that were unhealthy for our hair—not to mention our psyches! Now, because of the natural hair movement, black women are learning more about healthy hair care, keeping ourselves informed about what products we consume, and taking better care of our general health. By speaking out and supporting each other, we are changing rigid ideas of what is beautiful, professional, and acceptable in society.

It may not be accurate to say that hair product manufacturers intend to damage our health. Consumers have a responsibility to stay informed about what goes into our bodies. And all of us must work to make sure strict ideas about what makes someone beautiful and/or acceptable doesn’t result in discrimination. However, manufacturers should, at a minimum, be responsible for providing accurate and accessible information about the ingredients in their hair care products. And the FDA should step up its game, too, and bring standards for cosmetics in line with many other countries that ban some of the most common ingredients in U.S. hair care products.

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**AFTER YOU READ:**

1. What is the main idea of this article?

2. According to the author: a) Why are warning labels on hair dye products not necessarily enough to protect consumers? And b) Why are black women at the forefront of the natural hair movement?

3. Collect packages from hair care products. Read the labels and ingredients. Share what you learn.

4. What happens to the chemicals that we rinse from our hair? Where do they go? What else might they affect? See p. 33 for more on this question.

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**Alternatives?**

See the hair care recipes on pp. 29-35 that use all natural ingredients.