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Cosmetics and the cancer connection

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Many of us wear make-up, or use personal care products - like shampoos, deodorants and hair spray. But would we still use them if we knew what Health Canada has known for years: that these products contain ingredients suspected of causing cancer?

Angelika Hackett of Vancouver has read up on the cancer and cosmetics connection. She's concluded there's nothing pretty about a lot of products:

"I don't think people should really be using them. And also I don't want my daughters to start using a lot of them on their skin or hair." Hackett says she doesn't want her teenage daughters buying into the beauty myth.

The personal care products industry is a \$4 billion-a-year business in Canada. Health Canada approves the products: how bad can they be? *Marketplace* has uncovered a small but fierce debate. A growing number of scientists say the chemicals in these products may -over time- give us cancer.

Hackett's concerns are with chemicals like butylated hydroxyanisole, Titanium Dioxide, and dozens of other cancer-causing agents analysed for a decade in books by Dr. Sam Epstein, a cancer scientist at the University of Illinois in Chicago.

"Mainstream cosmetics produced by mainstream industries are literally a witch's brew of carcinogenic ingredients," Epstein told *Marketplace*.

Those are ugly words to the beauty business. Epstein's 40 years of research have convinced him loads of personal care products may be giving us cancer.

Epstein's research found a common skin cream contains at least two ingredients linked to cancer. A mascara: three. A blush: four. A lipstick: five. That's enough to worry Angelika Hackett.

Why haven't the ingredients been removed? A powerful cosmetics industry argues the contentious chemicals are in such small amounts, they can't do any harm. Critics agree the amounts are small, but say the danger lies in using these products over and over, day in and day out. And since we're already swamped with so many cancer-causing chemicals, avoiding any is important.

Barely regulated

Marketplace tried to interview a dozen cosmetics companies, but none would talk. So we turned to Canada's main industry lobby group, the Cosmetics Toiletry and Fragrance Association.

"We remain very confident the ingredients used in cosmetics in Canada are safe when used at the levels they are used at," Carl Carter, the association's director said. "They're the ingredients that are used throughout the world."

That's not exactly correct. In Europe, regulators have told the industry it can't use some 400 chemicals - including suspected carcinogens. And they're about to ban more. The U.S. and Canada ban only a handful.

In Canada, the beauty business is barely regulated. We called Health Canada to find out why. We reached the head of cosmetics, Hugh Davis. He told that "Canada's regulations are so outrageously antiquated, they're not worth the paper they're written on."

Davis called cosmetics "high risk," "because you're applying them directly to your body."

But Davis wasn't allowed to give us an on-camera interview - instead, his boss Marta Caris stepped in.

"The 10,000 or more chemical ingredients present in the marketplace," she said, "most of those products -if not all of those products- are safe for use as intended by consumers."



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Angelika Hackett doesn't want her daughters buying into the beauty myth



Cosmetics contain 'a witch's brew of carcinogenic ingredients' says Dr. Sam Epstein



'They're playing God,' says Dr. William Lijinsky

Caris won't admit the products contain ingredients linked to cancer: "I have not in any of my comments indicated that a carcinogen is actually present in cosmetics. I have indicated that there has been evidence that suggests that there may be some potential for cancer causing potential or activity."

Comments like that anger Dr. William Lijinsky, a retired scientist who used to work for the U.S. National Cancer Institute.

"They're playing God ... How dare they?" He says. "People used to think mercury was safe. People used to think using phosphorous was safe. But they weren't."

The hair dye debate

A recent study out of California found that women who use dark permanent hair dyes double their chances of getting bladder cancer.

The hair dye debate has been raging for decades. When Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis died in 1994, many scientists suspected her cancer came from her hair colouring.

The California study is prompting European scientists to call for an urgent review. In Canada, there's been barely a whisper. The industry says there's no problem.

"The dyes are extremely safe in fact, they're one of the most studied classes of products in the world today," Carl Carter of the Cosmetics Toiletry and Fragrance Association told *Marketplace*.

That's not enough to convince Angelika Hackett: "The industry will tell you, 'our product has never caused cancer in anyone. It's perfectly safe. The amounts are so minute.' But you can say the same thing about smoking or drinking."

Hackett's not the only one who thinks industry's giving people the brush off. In Europe, groups like Friends of the Earth have organized protests, demanding chemical-free products.

Biochemist Michael Warhurst approves of Hackett's campaign: "I think the main thing Canadians can do is increase pressure on their politicians to regulate things properly, to actually try to look at the regulations from the point of view of public health and the environment."



"Those products are safe for use as intended by consumers," says Marta Caris, Health Canada

Ingredients may not be listed

Hackett refuses to buy products with ingredients she questions. Of course, that assumes ingredients are actually listed. That's not often the case. Unlike most developed countries, Canada has no law forcing companies to label ingredients - although Health Canada has been talking about it for 20 years.

"There is a priority that has been afforded this exercise. I cannot definitely speculate on the ultimate date on which the regulations would be promulgated," Health Canada's Marta Caris explained. In other words — don't hold your breath.

That means a lot of work for Angelika Hackett. She calls companies to find out what's in products and complains when the ingredients are on her toxic hit list. Some promise to check on her concerns and call her back. She's still waiting for several of those return calls.

Like Hackett, Dr. Samuel Epstein practices what he preaches. He only buys products he says won't increase his chances of getting cancer. "Shaving cream, shampoo - there are alternatives available."

You may pay a little more for these alternatives, but Hackett believes that'll change as more people demand personal care products get a makeover.