Show Us Your Secrets

Fragrances hide toxic chemical ingredients

A major loophole in federal law allows fragrance manufacturers to hide potentially hazardous chemicals in product scents, including substances linked to allergies, birth defects, and even cancer.

"Fragrance" = "Hidden Chemicals"

Take a quick look at a personal care product label, and you'll nearly always find a long list of chemical ingredients in tiny print. Chances are, somewhere in the midst of these technical chemical terms, is the simple word "fragrance." Although companies are required by law to list all chemicals ingredients in a product, a special loophole allows them to hide what's in the "fragrance" component[1]. And what's hidden in that simple word can include complex mixtures of up to hundreds of chemicals that studies show may be linked to a variety of health problems, including allergies, skin reactions, endocrine/hormone disruption, and possibly even birth defects. Companies are not required to test cosmetics for safety before they are sold. The label is the primary protection we have to make decisions about products we rub, pour, and lather on our skin and hair. Yet when it comes to fragrances, we don't even have this simple protection.

Who makes sure fragrances are safe?

The FDA, the agency responsible for overseeing product safety, does not systematically review the safety of fragrances. The FDA cannot require that fragrances be tested for safety before they are sold. Instead, the fragrance industry regulates itself, through their trade association, the International Fragrance Association, which funds and conducts safety assessments for fragrance ingredients. This self-regulating scheme has led to the widespread use of chemicals in fragrances that raise concerns when it comes to our health.

Top hazards hidden in fragranced products:

**Phthalates:** Common plasticizing ingredients linked to birth defects in the reproductive system of boys at exposure levels typical for about one-quarter of U.S. women [2, 3]. Lowers sperm-motility in adult men [4]. Studies in laboratory animals show significant developmental toxicity [5] and damage to adult reproductive, adrenal, liver, and kidney organs [5]. Under consumer pressure, some cosmetic companies recently agreed to remove phthalates from their products – but many others have not. Our product tests show phthalates in nearly three-quarters of 72 name-brand products tested [6], even though none of these products contained the term "phthalate" on the ingredient label. Instead, in most cases these phthalates were almost certainly hidden in the product's fragrance.

**Musks:** Artificial musks accumulate in our bodies, and are often detected in breast milk and blood [7-10]. Musks come in two basic types, nitromusks and polycyclic musks. Nitromusks are linked to skin irritation, sensitization [9,10], and even cancer in laboratory studies [11, 12]. They are also linked to reproductive and fertility problems in women at high levels of exposure [13]. Laboratory studies also suggest that both polycyclic musks and nitromusks may affect hormone systems [14-19]. While the European Union has banned use of some nitromusks in cosmetics and personal care products [20], the use of polycyclic musks as an alternative to the more toxic nitromusks has increased. In the US, all musk chemicals are unregulated, and safe levels of exposure have not yet been set.

**Allergic reactions:** Fragrances are considered to be among the top five known allergens [21, 22], and are known to both cause asthma and trigger asthma attacks [23, 24]. Unfortunately, EWG's 2005 detailed survey of approximately one-third of the industry safety panel's ingredient reviews revealed that allergen and sensitizer determinations were made with little scientific rigor and inadequate safety margins.
We recommend that you choose products free of fragrance for your Valentine's sweetheart. But read ingredient labels carefully – the term "fragrance-free" on a product does not necessarily mean a product is actually free of fragrance chemicals. Instead, a fragrance may be masking a chemical scent to create an illusion of fragrance free.

References


http://www.ewg.org/issues/cosmetics/valentine/index.php