

Beautiful Breasts

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I admit to occasions in days past, to pre-shower exams in the mirror and wishing. If only I were a bit less pear like, and more hourglass-like. If only my breasts were just a bit fuller – I'm lucky to fill out an A cup on a "fat day". Don't get me wrong, generally speaking I am happy with my body but like most women I can't help but wonder "What if?"

The "What if" question these days, however, has shifted from "What if I looked different?" to "What if my breasts are carrying contaminants that will someday give me cancer?"

Nearly 10 years ago I was poisoned by chloramine gas (a mixture of ammonia and bleach) while cleaning a client's home in the Hudson Valley, New York. I could have been killed by the combination, but suffered lung burn instead. This event began my quest to develop a line of toxin-free cleaning products and to raise awareness about readily available products that are poisoning us, either acutely, or chronically.

Although there are a multitude of assaults the human body is subjected to every day affecting our health, I will focus on two: cleaning products and beauty products (including body care and cosmetics). Both affect women's bodies, on average, more than men.

Women are still doing over 70% of the housework in the typical American home, and there are over 3 million female maids and house cleaners employed in the United States. An American woman will apply about 12 different products each day to her face and body, containing about 168 ingredients in total. By nature, women have more body fat than men, and many chemicals found in products we use are lipophilic (fat seeking). According to the United States Center for Disease Control women have higher levels of many chemicals in their bodies than men. This is no wonder.

Cosmetics companies such as Avon, Revlon, Estee Lauder and Mary Kay are well known for championing women's causes. However, let's look beyond the pretty facade. Each of these companies market products containing dangerous chemicals to the very demographic they claim to help. For example, in the Environmental Working Group's Skin Deep report, products were assigned scores from 0-10 based on the health concerns associated with their ingredients, with 10 being highest health concern. Over 80% of the tested Revlon products were rated 7.2 or higher. Revlon High Dimension 10 Minute Permanent Haircolor scored 9.6 and contains both known and suspected carcinogens. Johnson & Johnson (parent company to Aveeno, Clean & Clear and Neutrogena), SC Johnson (manufacturers of Glade and Scrubbing Bubbles) and Proctor & Gamble (parent company to Cover Girl, and manufacturers of Febreze and Mr. Clean), not only market toxic products, but also engage in the abhorrent practice of animal testing.

These companies have no authority to tell us when, and how, we are beautiful. They are attacking our femininity by manufacturing and marketing products that are poisoning us and our babies, and disrupting our body's ability to regulate itself by mimicking our natural hormones.

Certain chemical families, found in both cleaning products and beauty products, are known endocrine disruptors and are linked to major health issues like breast cancer, birth defects and reproductive problems. Phenols are found in disinfectants, phthalates (THAY-lates) or plasticizers, and various parabens (PAIR-a-bens) used as preservatives are found in cosmetics, personal care products and perfumes. Methyl, ethyl, propyl, benzyol and benzyl are all different types of parabens. Placental extract (from human, equine or porcine sources) and other estrogenic chemicals are also used in cosmetics and hair care products for skin lightening and hair straightening. These products are particularly marketed to women of color.

Hormonal levels are central to breast cancer risk. Estrogens are necessary for tumor development because they affect tissue organization, including cell proliferation. The endocrine system, which regulates the hormones in our bodies, works closely with the nervous and immune systems. A healthy endocrine system is critical to the functioning of animals – controlling growth, sexuality, learning, behavior, reproduction and much more. The body's cells need to communicate with each other to regulate their growth. The more we are exposed to dangerous chemicals - which can block our endocrine system from functioning properly - the higher our risk for various diseases.

The Precautionary Principle (PP) mandates that manufacturers and industries that use or emit toxic chemicals must assess the health and safety consequences, as well as environmental impacts, before introducing them to the marketplace. It also points out the polluter must pay for the research. The PP rests on the democratic principle that government officials are obligated to serve the public interest by protecting human health and the environment. An indication of harm, not just proof of harm, is grounds for action.

A look at the Food and Drug Administration's website, however, points out the absence of meaningful governmental protection against dangerous chemicals in cosmetics found on the market today.

“Cosmetic products and ingredients are not subject to FDA pre-market approval authority, with the exception of color additives... Cosmetic firms are responsible for substantiating the safety of their products and ingredients before marketing... Manufacturers are not required to register their cosmetic establishments, file data on ingredients, or report cosmetic-related injuries to FDA. However, companies are encouraged to register...” <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/cos-206.html>.

The only entity reviewing chemicals in cosmetics sold in the United States is the industry-funded Cosmetics Ingredient Review Panel, which has no regulatory authority and to date has only reviewed 11% of the ingredients in cosmetics.

What is a conscientious woman to do?

Take a survey of the beauty products you use. Scrutinize their ingredients. That tube of lipstick you can't live without? Ask yourself: Can I safely live with it? Begin to transition away from toxic products. There are many companies, and individuals, that make toxin-free soaps, lotions and makeup in deliciously scented varieties. Check out your local farmer's market, and talk to local business people to find one closest to you.

Also, examine the cleaning products you use. Many have only a few, if any ingredients listed on their labels. This should send up a red flag.

National Geographic has the Green Guide Product Review you can reference for safer products: <http://www.thegreenguide.com/>. Let's look out for ourselves, and our sisters, by making safer purchasing decisions.

Further, take action by contacting your representatives to demand effective standards for safe products. Find your representative via the American Association of University Women website: <http://capwiz.com/aauw/dbq/officials/>.

We shall not be the silent majority any longer.

Relevant links:

The Campaign For Safe Cosmetics: www.safecosmetics.org

Breast Cancer Action: www.thinkbeforeyoupink.org

National Toxicology Program: <http://ntp.niehs.nih.gov/>

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC): <http://www.iarc.fr/>

Women's Voices for the Earth: www.womenandenvironment.org