

Beauty Basics: The Bad Stuff

by Sarah Forrest

Deciphering the back of a beauty bottle can be like trying to understand a foreign language sans interpreter. With the unpronounceable terms and mystery ingredients, it's easy to feel lost. Unfortunately, not knowing what you're putting on your skin and hair has risks: The FDA doesn't approve personal-care products, and many contain elements that may pose health problems.

To make matters worse, it's not just the ingredients in isolation that pose a problem. "We don't know how things work together," says Anne Marie Fine, M.D., a Scottsdale, Arizona-based naturopathic skin specialist, "or what the total effect from all the products we use every day will be."

While you can't expect to avoid the bad stuff completely, you can get good at scanning labels for red-flag terms. With Fine's help, we identified eight common questionable ingredients. Keep these on your hit list, and start choosing healthier products.

Potentially dangerous ingredients may be lurking in your beauty products. Learn how to spot them

disodium laureth sulfosuccinate (DLS)

What it is A chemical salt
What it does Lowers water's surface tension, which lets products spread out and penetrate more easily; boosts foaming action.
Why avoid? It can produce harmful byproducts such as 1,4-dioxane and ethylene oxide, two chemicals linked to cancer.

triethanolamine (TEA)

What it is A chemical compound derived from ammonia
What it does Acts as a cleansing agent and foam booster; prevents products from separating.
Why avoid? Research has linked TEA to certain cancers. Additionally, it's sometimes contaminated with nitrosamines, a class of suspected carcinogens. TEA also may irritate skin and mucous membranes.

parabens (i.e., butyl-, methyl-, and propylparabens)

What they are Chemical preservatives used in up to 90 percent of cosmetics
What they do Keep products from going bad.
Why avoid? Ongoing studies suggest parabens may act like estrogen in the body, and estrogen exposure has been linked to breast cancer and hormone disruptions.

propylene glycol

What it is A thick, clear alcohol
What it does Helps the skin soak up moisture, thins out liquids, and enhances skin's absorption of other ingredients in the product.
Why avoid? It may interfere with reproductive health. Additionally, because it helps other substances sink into skin, it becomes detrimental if the product contains irritants or toxins.

imidazolidinyl urea

What it is The most commonly used preservative after parabens
What it does Extends a product's shelf life.
Why avoid? A top cause of contact dermatitis, imidazolidinyl urea may also stress your immune system. Plus, when used with water, it can release formaldehyde, a toxic chemical.

PEGs

What they are Polyethylene glycol or polyethylene, which are both chemicals derived from petroleum
What they do Help prevent products from separating; also used as gelling and thickening agents.
Why avoid? PEGs can be contaminated with 1,4-dioxane, a known carcinogen created during the manufacturing process. Certain PEGs may also cause hives and eczema and have been linked to kidney toxicity.

petrolatum

What it is Petroleum jelly
What it does Helps skin retain moisture, softens skin, and gives products a shiny, smooth texture.
Why avoid? Petrolatum forms a film on your skin to prevent moisture from escaping. Unfortunately, that film also traps toxins under the skin (your largest organ) and keeps it from breathing properly. This can clog pores and interfere with skin's excretory function (i.e., sweating) and cell development.

phenoxyethanol

What it is An oily liquid preservative made from phenol, a coal tar derivative
What it does Prevents scents from rapidly evaporating; sometimes used as a fragrance.
Why avoid? Japan restricts use of phenoxyethanol, which research has linked to both endocrine disruption and cancers. It may also cause skin and eye irritation.

7 Good-for-You Ingredients

These scary-sounding beauty boosters actually benefit skin and hair.

ascorbic acid

What it is Vitamin C
What it does Keeps products from spoiling. C also stimulates the production of collagen, which slows as you age, and minimizes fine lines.

butyrospermum parkii

What it is Shea butter
What it does Provides easily absorbed moisture and can also heal minor blemishes and reduce inflammation.

cera alba

What it is Beeswax
What it does Helps make products more uniform in texture. It also allows skin to seal in moisture naturally and has antibacterial properties.

hyaluronic acid

What it is A sugar compound that occurs naturally in skin cells
What it does Boosts firmness and combats aging and wrinkles, and plays a role in cell turnover, which promotes radiant, healthy skin.

panthenol

What it is Vitamin B5
What it does Offers deep-penetrating moisture to heal and fortify skin and hair. Additionally, it may help repair skin tissue and fight certain types of dermatitis.

retinol

What it is Vitamin A
What it does Boosts long-term hydration, penetrates deeper layers of the dermis to improve texture, and also aids in evening out mottled pigmentation.

tocopherol

What it is Vitamin E
What it does May slow the aging process by fighting free radicals and protecting skin against sun damage. It can also help smooth out skin overall.



prop styling by Julie Ho

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