

Analysis of Toxic Substances in the Composition of Cosmetic Products

 **Khadija Gasimova**

¹ Gasimova, Kh. A. Master's Student, Nakhchivan State University, Azerbaijan. Email: qasimovaxedice342@gmail.com. ORCID:

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-9315-516X>.

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Abstract; This study provides a critical analysis of potentially toxic substances commonly found in cosmetic products, with a particular focus on parabens, phthalates, formaldehyde-releasing agents, surfactants, and fragrance components. Using a systematic literature review approach, the research examines the functional roles of these substances in cosmetic formulations and evaluates their possible health effects associated with long-term and repeated exposure. Evidence from recent toxicological and epidemiological studies indicates that certain cosmetic ingredients may act as endocrine disruptors, contribute to skin irritation and allergic reactions, and pose cumulative health risks through dermal absorption. The study also highlights existing challenges related to insufficient labeling transparency and limited consumer awareness, which hinder informed decision-making. Furthermore, current industry trends toward safer alternatives, including natural and plant-based ingredients, are discussed as promising strategies for reducing health risks. The findings emphasize the need for improved regulatory oversight, clearer labeling practices, and increased public awareness to promote safer cosmetic use and encourage the development of health-conscious cosmetic formulations.

Keywords: *cosmetic products, toxic substances, endocrine disruption, consumer safety*

1. INTRODUCTION

Cosmetic products play a significant role in everyday life, serving essential functions related to personal hygiene, skin care, hair care, and aesthetic enhancement. Due to their widespread and continuous use across different age groups and genders, cosmetics have become an integral part of modern consumer culture. Along with their growing popularity, concerns regarding the safety of cosmetic products have increased, particularly with respect to the chemical substances used in their formulation.

Many cosmetic products contain a wide range of synthetic ingredients, including preservatives, surfactants, fragrances, colorants, and stabilizing agents. Although these substances are added to improve product quality, shelf life, and sensory appeal, scientific evidence suggests that some of them may pose potential health risks when used frequently or over long periods. Dermal exposure to toxic elements and chemical compounds may lead to cumulative effects, increasing the likelihood of adverse health outcomes.

Recent studies have highlighted the presence of toxic heavy metals and endocrine-disrupting chemicals in various cosmetic products, raising serious public health concerns. Research indicates that substances such as mercury, lead, cadmium, parabens, and phthalates can enter the human body through skin absorption and contribute to hormonal imbalance, allergic reactions, and other systemic effects. These risks are particularly concerning for vulnerable populations, including children, adolescents, and pregnant women.

As a result, there has been growing interest among researchers, regulatory authorities, and consumers in evaluating the safety of cosmetic ingredients and improving transparency in product labeling. Understanding the potential toxicological effects of cosmetic components is essential for promoting safer

consumer choices and encouraging the cosmetic industry to adopt more responsible and health-conscious formulation practices.

2. CHEMICAL COMPOSITION OF COSMETIC PRODUCTS

Cosmetic products are complex chemical formulations composed of multiple functional ingredients, each serving a specific purpose. Common components include preservatives to prevent microbial growth, surfactants to enhance cleansing and foaming properties, fragrances to improve sensory appeal, colorants for visual attractiveness, and stabilizers to maintain product consistency. In addition, active ingredients are often incorporated to provide moisturizing, anti-aging, or protective effects.

While these substances contribute to the effectiveness and commercial appeal of cosmetic products, their safety depends on several factors, including chemical structure, concentration, frequency of use, and the ability of the substance to penetrate the skin barrier. Toxicological evaluation of cosmetic ingredients focuses on dermal exposure pathways, absorption rates, bioaccumulation potential, and long-term health effects.

Scientific studies have shown that repeated exposure to certain cosmetic ingredients may result in cumulative toxicity. Heavy metals such as lead, mercury, and arsenic have been detected in some cosmetic products, either as intentional additives or as contaminants. Even at low concentrations, prolonged exposure to these metals may pose significant health risks, including neurological disorders, skin irritation, and organ toxicity.

In addition to heavy metals, synthetic organic compounds such as parabens, phthalates, and certain surfactants have been associated with endocrine disruption and skin-related adverse effects. Toxicological risk assessment therefore plays a crucial role in determining acceptable exposure limits and guiding regulatory decisions. Continuous evaluation of cosmetic formulations is necessary to ensure consumer safety and to minimize potential health hazards associated with long-term cosmetic use.

3. PARABENS IN COSMETICS

Parabens are a group of synthetic preservatives widely used in cosmetic products to prevent the growth of bacteria, fungi, and mold. Their primary function is to extend the shelf life of products and maintain microbiological safety, especially in formulations that contain water. Commonly used parabens include methylparaben, ethylparaben, propylparaben, and butylparaben. Due to their low cost, broad-spectrum antimicrobial activity, and stability over a wide pH range, parabens have been extensively applied in creams, lotions, shampoos, makeup products, and personal care items.

Despite their effectiveness, the safety of parabens has become a subject of scientific debate. Toxicological studies suggest that parabens can be absorbed through the skin and detected in human tissues and bodily fluids. One of the main concerns associated with parabens is their estrogen-like activity, which allows them to act as endocrine-disrupting chemicals. This hormonal activity may interfere with normal endocrine function and has raised concerns regarding reproductive health, hormonal balance, and developmental processes.

Research indicates that long-term exposure to certain parabens, particularly propylparaben and butylparaben, may pose a higher risk due to their stronger biological activity. Although a direct causal relationship between paraben exposure and serious diseases such as cancer has not been conclusively established, the potential health risks have led regulatory authorities in several countries to restrict or limit

the use of specific parabens in cosmetic products. As a result, consumer demand for paraben-free cosmetics has increased, encouraging manufacturers to seek alternative preservation systems.

4. PHTHALATES AND THEIR EFFECTS

Phthalates are a group of chemical compounds commonly used in cosmetic products as plasticizers and fragrance stabilizers. In cosmetics, phthalates are primarily found in perfumes, deodorants, hair sprays, nail polishes, and lotions, where they help improve product flexibility, durability, and fragrance longevity. Due to their widespread use, phthalates represent one of the most common sources of human exposure to synthetic chemicals through personal care products.

Scientific evidence indicates that phthalates can enter the human body through dermal absorption and inhalation. Once absorbed, these compounds may interfere with the endocrine system by altering hormone production and regulation. Numerous studies have identified phthalates as endocrine disruptors, capable of affecting reproductive health in both males and females. Reported effects include reduced fertility, altered hormone levels, and developmental abnormalities, particularly when exposure occurs during critical periods such as pregnancy.

Certain phthalates, including diethyl phthalate (DEP), dibutyl phthalate (DBP), and di(2-ethylhexyl) phthalate (DEHP), have been associated with increased health risks. Research has shown correlations between phthalate exposure and adverse reproductive outcomes, as well as potential effects on fetal development. These findings have prompted stricter regulatory measures and increased scrutiny of cosmetic formulations. Consequently, there is growing emphasis on reducing phthalate use and promoting safer alternatives within the cosmetic industry.

5. FORMALDEHYDE AND FORMALDEHYDE-RELEASING AGENTS

Formaldehyde is a highly reactive chemical compound known for its strong antimicrobial properties. Due to its toxicity and carcinogenic potential, the direct use of formaldehyde in cosmetic products is prohibited in many countries. However, formaldehyde-releasing agents are still present in certain cosmetic formulations, where they function as preservatives by gradually releasing small amounts of formaldehyde over time. Common formaldehyde releasers include DMDM hydantoin, quaternium-15, diazolidinyl urea, and imidazolidinyl urea.

These substances are most frequently found in shampoos, conditioners, liquid soaps, nail products, and hair-straightening treatments. Their use is primarily intended to prevent microbial contamination and extend product shelf life. Despite their functional benefits, formaldehyde-releasing agents raise significant safety concerns due to the continuous low-level exposure they may cause during regular cosmetic use.

Exposure to formaldehyde and its releasing agents has been associated with a range of adverse health effects. Short-term exposure may lead to skin irritation, allergic contact dermatitis, and respiratory discomfort, particularly in individuals with sensitive skin or pre-existing conditions. Long-term or repeated exposure has raised concerns regarding its potential carcinogenic effects, especially through inhalation. As a result, regulatory authorities have imposed strict concentration limits and labeling requirements for products containing formaldehyde-releasing preservatives, while encouraging the development of safer alternative preservation systems.

6. SURFACTANTS (SLS AND SIMILAR COMPOUNDS)

Surfactants are essential components of many cosmetic and personal care products due to their ability to reduce surface tension and enhance cleansing performance. Sodium lauryl sulfate (SLS) and similar compounds are widely used in shampoos, facial cleansers, body washes, and toothpaste because of their strong foaming and detergent properties. These substances effectively remove dirt, oil, and impurities from the skin and hair, contributing to a feeling of cleanliness.

Despite their effectiveness, SLS and related surfactants have been associated with adverse skin effects, particularly when used frequently or in high concentrations. One of the primary concerns is their ability to disrupt the skin's natural lipid barrier, which plays a crucial role in maintaining hydration and protecting against external irritants. Damage to this barrier can lead to increased transepidermal water loss and heightened skin sensitivity.

Skin-related side effects linked to SLS exposure include dryness, redness, itching, and irritation. Individuals with sensitive skin, eczema, or other dermatological conditions may experience exacerbated symptoms. In response to these concerns, many manufacturers have begun replacing SLS with milder surfactants and promoting sulfate-free formulations. This shift reflects growing consumer awareness and the cosmetic industry's efforts to balance product performance with skin safety.

7. FORMALDEHYDE AND FORMALDEHYDE-RELEASING AGENTS

Formaldehyde is a volatile organic compound with strong antimicrobial properties, which has led to its historical use as a preservative. However, due to its high toxicity and classification as a potential human carcinogen, the direct addition of formaldehyde to cosmetic products is strictly regulated or banned in many countries. Despite this, formaldehyde-releasing agents are still used in certain cosmetic formulations as indirect preservatives.

These compounds release small amounts of formaldehyde gradually to inhibit microbial growth and extend product shelf life. Common formaldehyde-releasing agents found in cosmetics include DMDM hydantoin, quaternium-15, diazolidinyl urea, and imidazolidinyl urea. They are frequently present in shampoos, liquid soaps, conditioners, nail products, and hair treatment formulations, particularly in products with high water content.

Health hazards associated with formaldehyde exposure include skin irritation, allergic contact dermatitis, and respiratory discomfort. Individuals with sensitive skin or pre-existing dermatological conditions may be particularly vulnerable. Prolonged or repeated exposure, especially through inhalation, has raised concerns regarding carcinogenic risk. As a result, regulatory agencies require strict concentration limits and clear labeling of formaldehyde-releasing substances, while encouraging manufacturers to adopt safer preservation alternatives.

8. SURFACTANTS (SLS AND SIMILAR COMPOUNDS)

Surfactants are essential ingredients in cosmetic and personal care products due to their cleansing and emulsifying properties. Sodium lauryl sulfate (SLS) and related compounds are commonly used in shampoos, facial cleansers, body washes, and toothpaste to enhance foaming and improve the removal of oils, dirt, and impurities from the skin and hair.

The role of surfactants in cosmetic formulations is to ensure effective cleaning while maintaining product stability and consumer satisfaction. However, strong surfactants such as SLS can negatively affect the skin's protective barrier. By removing natural lipids from the skin surface, these compounds may disrupt the balance between hydration and protection.

Skin-related side effects associated with SLS and similar surfactants include dryness, redness, itching, irritation, and increased sensitivity. In individuals with conditions such as eczema or atopic dermatitis, these effects may be more pronounced. In response to growing safety concerns, many cosmetic manufacturers have shifted toward milder surfactants and sulfate-free formulations to reduce irritation while maintaining cleansing efficacy.

9. FRAGRANCES AND ALLERGENS

Fragrances are widely used in cosmetic products to enhance sensory appeal and improve consumer acceptance. However, fragrance formulations often consist of complex mixtures containing dozens or even hundreds of chemical compounds. Due to intellectual property protection, manufacturers are not required to disclose all individual fragrance ingredients, which are often listed collectively under the term “fragrance” or “parfum” on product labels.

This lack of transparency poses hidden risks, as fragrance mixtures may contain substances capable of causing allergic reactions or skin sensitization. Fragrances are among the most common causes of contact dermatitis associated with cosmetic use. Repeated exposure can increase sensitivity over time, even in individuals without prior allergic history.

Common allergenic fragrance substances include limonene, linalool, eugenol, geraniol, and coumarin. When oxidized, these compounds may become more allergenic and trigger adverse skin reactions. Regulatory authorities in several regions require the labeling of specific fragrance allergens when present above certain concentrations. Nevertheless, fragrance-related sensitivity remains a significant concern, highlighting the need for improved labeling transparency and the development of hypoallergenic and fragrance-free cosmetic alternatives.

10. LABELING AND CONSUMER AWARENESS

Product labeling plays a crucial role in ensuring cosmetic safety and enabling consumers to make informed purchasing decisions. Accurate and transparent labeling allows users to identify potentially harmful substances and assess the suitability of products for their individual needs. However, transparency problems remain a significant challenge within the cosmetic industry.

In many cases, cosmetic labels do not clearly indicate the concentration of ingredients, making it difficult for consumers to evaluate potential health risks. Additionally, certain components, such as fragrance mixtures, are often listed under generic terms like “fragrance” or “parfum,” which may conceal the presence of allergenic or sensitizing substances. This lack of detailed information limits consumer awareness and reduces the effectiveness of personal risk assessment.

Informed consumer choice is essential for reducing exposure to potentially toxic ingredients. Increased public awareness, combined with clear and standardized labeling practices, can empower consumers to select safer products and encourage manufacturers to adopt more responsible formulation strategies. Educational initiatives and regulatory enforcement play a key role in improving transparency and protecting consumer health.

11. SAFER ALTERNATIVES IN THE COSMETIC INDUSTRY

Growing concerns about the toxicological effects of certain cosmetic ingredients have driven the industry toward the development of safer alternatives. One major trend is the increased use of natural and plant-based ingredients, which are generally perceived as less harmful and more compatible with human skin. Botanical extracts, essential oils, and naturally derived preservatives are increasingly being incorporated into cosmetic formulations.

In addition to natural ingredients, the cosmetic industry is actively exploring innovative preservation systems and mild surfactants that reduce irritation while maintaining product effectiveness. The demand for products labeled as paraben-free, phthalate-free, sulfate-free, and fragrance-free reflects a broader shift toward health-conscious and environmentally responsible cosmetic production.

Industry trends also indicate a growing emphasis on sustainability, ethical sourcing, and green chemistry principles. These developments not only enhance product safety but also contribute to consumer trust and long-term public health protection. Continuous research and regulatory oversight are essential to ensure that alternative ingredients provide genuine safety benefits without unintended risks.

12. CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined the presence of potentially toxic substances in cosmetic products, focusing on commonly used chemical components such as parabens, phthalates, formaldehyde-releasing agents, surfactants, and fragrance compounds. The analysis highlights that long-term and repeated exposure to certain cosmetic ingredients may pose health risks, including endocrine disruption, skin irritation, allergic reactions, and systemic effects.

The findings emphasize the importance of transparent labeling, informed consumer choice, and stricter regulatory control to minimize these risks. Consumers are encouraged to carefully read product labels, avoid ingredients associated with known health concerns, and prefer products formulated with safer alternatives. At the industry level, manufacturers should prioritize the development of non-toxic, hypoallergenic, and environmentally friendly formulations.

In conclusion, improving cosmetic safety requires a collaborative approach involving regulatory authorities, industry stakeholders, and consumers. By promoting transparency, encouraging innovation, and increasing public awareness, the cosmetic industry can move toward safer and more sustainable practices that protect both human health and the environment.

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