The way author and Campaign for Safe Cosmetics co-founder Stacy Malkan sees it, banning potentially harmful chemicals from personal care products like makeup and shampoo is a no-brainer.

When the self-proclaimed "former makeup addict" from Berkeley itemized the daily beauty routine she religiously performed as a high school cheerleader, the results were "shocking."

From lotion to foundation to hair spray, 19 products total, Malkan looked up each one in the Environmental Working Group's Skin Deep database, the only comprehensive beauty-product ingredient database accessible to the public online.

"I was exposing myself to 230 chemicals every day before I even got on the bus for school," the former Colorado reporter and newspaper publisher says.

Malkan was outraged. According to her logic, there shouldn't be any toxic chemicals in cosmetics and personal care products. With the current toy crisis, lead anything surely would raise a flag.

Yet, amid all the hype about green products and even an outright European Union ban on carcinogens and chemicals that can cause reproductive harm in makeup, her group's effort to prohibit potentially harmful chemicals in the United States has proved as messy as a lipstick stain on a gentleman's collar.

Case in point: the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics' October report, "A Poison Kiss: The Problem of Lead in Lipstick," which found lead in some red lipsticks.

The study focused on red lipsticks because of its iconic beauty status and also to standardize the samples, Malkan says. Of the 33 brand names tested, 61 percent contained lead at a level higher than 0.02 parts per million. Of those, a third exceeded the FDA limit for candy: 0.1 ppm.

Yet, it isn't all bad news. About 39 percent of the lipsticks did not have any "detectable" levels of lead.

Since the study was released, industry response has been dismissive, says Malkan, whose book
"Not Just a Pretty Face: The Ugly Side of the Beauty Industry" details the often adversarial relationship between big-name corporate companies and activists and environmentalists.

"The principal concern about the safety of lead is ingestion by children," says John Bailey, the Cosmetic, Toiletry and Fragrance Association's chief scientist, who, through the association's Cosmetic Ingredient Review panel, tests products for safety. "By raising unfounded questions about lead in lipstick, and claims on other ingredients, the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics is distracting the public from other real concerns, such as lead in paint in imported toys. Raising concerns where there are none is a disservice to public health."

Dior, whose Addict Positive Red came in at No. 6 in the lead-level study (0.21 ppm), referred to cosmetics group's statements when asked for comment. However, just this past week, Dior makeup-counter clerks in downtown San Francisco assured shoppers that there was nothing to worry about, with one saying that the study was "an Internet myth." One of the company's lipsticks did make it on the no-lead list: Replenishing Lipcolor Red Premiere.

L'Oreal, which tops the list with two products, Colour Riche True Red (0.65 ppm) and Classic Wine (0.58 ppm), and CoverGirl, whose Incredifull Lipcolor Maximum Red (0.56 ppm) and Continuous Color Cherry Brandy (0.28 ppm) are the next ones down, maintain that not only are their products safe and in compliance with federal regulation but also that consumer safety is always a foremost priority of their companies.

Anitra Marsh of Procter & Gamble, which owns CoverGirl, says that since pigments come from the earth, they "might also contain trace amounts of this naturally occurring lead at extremely low levels, but they do not pose any risk to consumers. All pigments used in our lipsticks are FDA approved."

L'Oreal's response echoes Marsh's statement.

"Each and every ingredient used in our products has been thoroughly reviewed and tested by our internal safety team made up of toxicologists, clinicians, pharmacists and physicians," company spokeswoman Rebecca Caruso said in an e-mail.

The study also found that price wasn't indicative of quality. The ones with the highest levels of lead ranged from drugstore staples such as L'Oreal, CoverGirl and Maybelline to high-end titans such as Dior. Perhaps most surprising is PeaceKeeper's Paint Me Compassionate, which comes from the company's "natural lipstick" line.

It is worrisome, says Alastair Iles, a UC Berkeley assistant professor of environmental science, policy and management.

"What's most important about this report is that lead has been found in a product that women
apply directly to their mouths and that is readily ingested," Iles says. "It's such an intimate exposure. The lead can also be dissipated into the environment surrounding women, and other people, including children, can come into contact. ... And what's also intriguing is that the study showed great variability within brands. That is, the industry might not have as good quality controls as it imagines. So consumers may be more exposed than expected."

However, in a statement that the cosmetics group released in response to the lipstick study, Bailey says:

"Lead is found naturally in air, water, and soil. Consequently, lead may also be found at extremely low levels in the raw ingredients used in formulating cosmetics. The average amount of lead the average woman would be exposed to when using cosmetics is 1,000 times less than the amount she would get from eating, breathing, and drinking water that meets Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) drinking water standards."

For Malkan and Iles, another concern is the cumulative effects of long-term chemical exposure from everyday product use. Lipstick, in particular, is troubling because, unlike other products, it is usually applied multiple times a day.

"We have no idea of whether we face significant risks from all the chemical products that we are using inside our houses and workplaces," Iles writes in an e-mail. "There is no concrete proof yet that many of the chemicals actually cause adverse health impacts in humans in this cumulative way. ... Nonetheless, there is an emerging array of research demonstrating that endocrine disruption by chemicals can lead to developmental, neurological, and reproductive health problems in children. ... In addition, there are hundreds of chemicals (now over 800) that the European Union has banned as 'carcinogenic, mutagenic, or reproductive' toxins. In the U.S., most of these chemicals are not regulated."

Which gets to the heart of the issue: whether the government should allow trace amounts of lead, and whether the cosmetics industry should be subjected to more stringent regulation.

Under current FDA regulation, cosmetics do not need approval before they go on the store shelves - unless, as agency spokeswoman Stephanie Kwisnek points out, they contain some ingredients that fall under its jurisdiction, such as color additives. Even then, the FDA does make allowances for "trace-level contaminants," like lead, because "given background levels in the environment, some low level is not completely avoidable even under good manufacturing practice."

It is up to individual companies to ensure product safety. To date, the FDA hasn't found any harmful levels of lead in any of the lipsticks included in the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics' report. In fact, Kwisnek says, the FDA is independently verifying the group's findings. Once those results come in, "if any product under FDA jurisdiction is found to contain a poisonous or deleterious substance that is injurious to the user, the Agency will not hesitate to take appropriate action as
deemed necessary, consistent with our obligation to protect the health and welfare of consumers."

Yet it's exactly this type of "wait and see" approach that disturbs Malkan. Even though California is the first state to require cosmetic companies to disclose all potentially harmful chemicals contained in products, it defeated a ban on harmful ingredients, as has the European Union.


Malkan's beauty advice? Though she still uses makeup, "simpler is better," she says, "with fewer ingredients overall."

-- To see how your makeup bag stacks up, go to the cosmetic safety database, Skin Deep, at www.cosmeticsdatabase.com.


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