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Carcinogens at the cosmetics counter

By Sue Hutchison; Mercury News

When Janet Nudelman spoke at a forum this month to help launch a national campaign urging cosmetics companies to ban dangerous chemicals from beauty products, she said something that should strike a chord with every woman who's gagged from the fumes of a home hair-coloring job or inspected the list of ingredients in a stinging anti-wrinkle cream.

"What effectively scours a garage floor may not be the best choice for a facial cleanser," Nudelman, program director of the Breast Cancer Fund, said at the San Francisco forum. "Known and suspected breast carcinogens have no place in cosmetics and personal care products. Period."

It seems pretty straightforward, right? Not exactly.

Unimpeded by FDA

A report issued recently by the Environmental Working Group, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy organization, reminded consumers that the Food and Drug Administration does not require health studies or pre-market testing for cosmetics before they hit the shelves.

The EWG report, called "Skin Deep," found that almost 90 percent of the more than 10,000 ingredients used in personal care products have not been evaluated by government regulators. It also found that one of every 100 products on the market contains ingredients that have been classified as known or suspected carcinogens. The report, which can be found at www.ewg.org

Little is known about how long-term use of beauty products affects human health, and, of course, the major cosmetics companies insist they are perfectly safe. But common sense dictates that you should think twice about rubbing something into your face that contains a chemical such as acrylamide, which has been linked to mammary tumors in lab rats.

Every time an advocacy group sounds the alarm about environmental toxins causing cancer, an industry group is quick to point out the lack of scientific evidence. In the Bay Area, which has one of the highest rates of breast cancer in the country, studies have not found a connection between breast-cancer "clusters" and certain chemicals.

Little consolation

Still, considering that thousands of chemicals have come into use in recent decades, it seems pretty foolish to wrap ourselves in those studies like a security blanket.

"The absence of data should not be taken as proof of safety," Nudelman told me from her San Francisco office. "The question should be: Why would cosmetics companies knowingly place proven carcinogens in their products at all?"

European women began asking that question and finally clamored for more governmental regulation. As a result, the European Parliament has required all companies manufacturing personal care products for sale in the European Union to phase out the use of specific chemicals by September of this year.

So why can't companies do the same here? A group of organizations, including the Breast Cancer Fund, that launched the "Because We're Worth It" campaign has sent out letters asking 250 cosmetics companies to stop using ingredients that are known or strongly suspected carcinogens. But, so far, less than 10 percent have responded positively.

It's time to let the other 90 percent know that there's only so much we will sacrifice for beauty.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

More information can be found at www.safecosmetics.org

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