

Pretty Toxic: A Documentary Unveiling the Dangerous Side of the Beauty Industry

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › The documentary "Pretty Toxic" highlights real-life cases of severe health consequences from using seemingly harmless personal care products, emphasizing the need for stronger safety regulations
- › The U.S. cosmetics industry operates under minimal regulation, with outdated laws from 1938 and no FDA authority to recall dangerous products, posing health risks to consumers
- › Common ingredients in personal care products, such as phthalates, parabens and formaldehyde, have been linked to serious health issues including cancer, reproductive problems and hormone disruption
- › Environmental concerns arise from personal care product chemicals entering water systems, with sunscreen pollution significantly impacting marine ecosystems, particularly coral reefs
- › Consumers can make informed choices using resources like EWG's Skin Deep database, while supporting companies prioritizing safety and transparency, and advocating for stronger regulations and green chemistry education

"Pretty Toxic" is an eye-opening film that exposes the shocking lack of regulation in the cosmetics and personal care products industry, along with the potential health consequences for consumers.¹

The global beauty industry is projected to reach \$670.8 billion in 2024.² Yet, in the U.S., the cosmetics and personal care products industry operates with minimal oversight. It's regulated by just "two pages of federal law" – in stark contrast to the 110 pages governing food and drugs.

The main law overseeing this industry, the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act, was passed in 1938 and is woefully outdated. It focuses primarily on preventing adulterated or misbranded products, not on monitoring harmful ingredients.

Even more concerning, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) lacks the authority to recall dangerous products from the market. "We have some faith that when we use a baby shampoo or baby soap that somebody somewhere has made sure it's OK for our kids," Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky says in the film, "and that just doesn't happen."³

Toxic Ingredients and Conflicts of Interest Riddle the Beauty Industry

In the absence of robust government oversight, the industry has largely regulated itself through organizations like the Personal Care Products Council (PCPC) and its Cosmetic Ingredient Review (CIR) panel. However, these groups are funded by the cosmetics industry itself, raising serious questions about conflicts of interest. As Ken Cook, president of the Environmental Working Group (EWG), notes:⁴

"PCPC and CIR are not government organizations, but we found it very difficult to convince reporters that that was the case. We finally had to send them to the websites of the organizations that did the regulation and they realized that the regulatory body was not a government agency. It was sort of recognized by the government. It was located in the trade association of the cosmetics industry.

It was funded by the cosmetics industry and the staff were picked by the cosmetics industry. These were the people who were evaluating ingredients in personal care products to see if they were OK."

The documentary highlights several concerning chemicals commonly found in personal care products:

- **Phthalates** — These chemicals, often used in fragrances, have been linked to reproductive issues,⁵ birth defects and hormone disruption. Alarmingly, one study found phthalates in 75% of products tested, yet they weren't listed on the labels.⁶
- **Parabens** — Used as preservatives, parabens have estrogen-like properties that increase breast cancer risk.
- **Formaldehyde** — Found in some hair straightening products at levels higher than those used in embalming, formaldehyde is a known carcinogen.
- **Methylchloroisothiazolinone (MCI) and Methylisothiazolinone (MI)** — These preservatives, found in the controversial WEN hair products, can cause severe allergic reactions and hair loss at high concentrations.

There's also a "fragrance loophole" that allows companies to hide hundreds of ingredients under the single term "fragrance" or "perfume" on product labels. Stacy Malkan, co-founder of the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics and codirector of U.S. Right to Know, states in the film:⁷

"The fragrance secret loophole is because companies claim that it's a trade secret so they don't want their competitors to know how they make their fragrance. But that is such an outdated argument because you can reverse engineer fragrances, and we have, to find out what's in them. And any company can do that for any of their competitors and they surely do.

*So the only people who don't know what's in fragrance are the consumers putting it on our bodies from all sorts of products, not just perfume, but **shampoo**, deodorant, lotion, baby products. It's everywhere."*

Tragic, Real-Life Consequences

The documentary shares heartbreaking stories of individuals who have suffered severe health consequences from seemingly innocuous **personal care products**:

- **Eliana Lawrence** — At just 9 years old, Eliana lost all her hair after using WEN Cleansing Conditioner. Five years later, she still has bald patches and has become highly sensitized to many products.
- **Hannah Forcier** — A young social media influencer whose hair defined her image experienced devastating hair loss after using a hair relaxer product. She recounts the experience:⁸

"When I turned around in the shower and felt all the water rushing through my hair, I was trying to wash it out and it started feeling really clumpy, and it started falling out, I could feel my hair coming out, and going down my back, and you could hear it splashing in the water."

The Battle for Safer Cosmetics Regulations

Clearly, current regulatory framework for U.S. personal care products is grossly inadequate. While the European Union has banned 1,400 chemicals from use in cosmetics and Canada has banned 600, the U.S. has prohibited just 11 since 1938.⁹

Bruce Jensen, CEO of Pure Haven, points out, "There's more and more science every single day that links the chemicals in those products to things like cancer and Alzheimer's and autism. And that's what's scary to me."¹⁰ However, even when consumers try to make informed choices, they face significant obstacles in the search for safer cosmetics and personal care products:

- **Greenwashing** — Many products use misleading terms and packaging to appear safer or more natural than they actually are.
- **Complex ingredient lists** — The International Nomenclature of Cosmetic Ingredients (INCI) system used for labeling makes it difficult for consumers to understand what's in their products.

- **Lack of pre-market testing** – Unlike drugs, cosmetics and personal care products don't require safety testing before hitting store shelves.

There are two bills in Congress aiming to improve cosmetics safety regulations. The Personal Care Products Safety Act, backed by Senator Feinstein and major beauty companies, proposes some changes but doesn't go far enough in protecting consumers. On the other hand, Schakowsky's Safe Cosmetics and Personal Care Products Act of 2019 offers more robust protections.

Schakowsky's bill would immediately ban 12 chemicals of concern and direct the FDA to assess 300 cosmetic ingredients for safety within the first two years. In contrast, the Feinstein bill would only evaluate five to 10 ingredients per year. While legislation is crucial, it's clear that industry influence often waters down these efforts.

Environmental Impact of Personal Care Products

The [chemicals in our personal care products](#) don't just affect our bodies – they have a significant impact on our environment. When we wash these products down the drain, they enter our water systems and persist through treatment processes.

One example is sunscreen. As the documentary notes, "14,000 tons of sunscreen are believed to wash into the oceans each year. That means 82,000 chemicals from personal care products may be tainting the seas."¹¹

This pollution is having devastating effects on marine ecosystems, particularly coral reefs. Hawaii has taken a bold step by banning sunscreens containing oxybenzone and octinoxate, chemicals known to harm coral reefs. This is a model that other regions should follow.

One hurdle, however, is the fact that even chemists don't typically know if the products they're creating are toxic. John Warner, a renowned chemist who founded the Warner Babcock Institute for Green Chemistry, highlighted a critical gap in chemistry education:¹²

"Never in my life did I have a class, did I have a seminar, did I have a discussion about how do you look at molecules and interpret whether or not their exposure to humans or the environment [is harmful]."

This lack of training means that many chemists creating products don't have the tools to assess potential harm. Warner's work to integrate green chemistry principles into education is crucial for creating safer products in the future.

Empowering Consumers Through Information

While systemic changes are needed, consumers aren't powerless. Tools like the Environmental Working Group's Skin Deep database and apps like Think Dirty allow shoppers to make more informed choices. As Cook explains, "The big change has been that now there's an ability to, in effect, inform and organize people that we didn't have before and people are starting to make decisions one product at a time, one category at a time."¹³

The growing demand for safer products has led to the emergence of truly natural and organic beauty companies that are leading the way, not just in creating safer products but in advocating for stricter regulations. Meanwhile, the issue of toxic cosmetics forces us to reconsider our notions of beauty.

The documentary raises important questions about the costs — both personal and environmental — of adhering to certain beauty standards. True beauty doesn't come with toxic side effects. It's about being the best version of yourself, which includes prioritizing your health and the health of our planet.

Moving Forward: A Call to Action

The current state of the personal care products industry is deeply troubling. The lack of meaningful regulation, combined with the health risks posed by many common ingredients, creates a perfect storm for consumer harm.

It's clear that we need comprehensive reform of the laws governing this industry, but in the meantime, I encourage you to become more informed about the products you use daily. Whenever possible, opt for products with simpler, recognizable ingredients.

Remember, what you put on your body is just as important as what you put in it. By making more conscious choices about your personal care products, you can reduce your exposure to harmful chemicals and protect your long-term health. To further prompt meaningful change, we can also:

1. **Educate ourselves** – Use resources like the EWG's Skin Deep database to make informed choices about the products we use.
2. **Vote with our dollars** – Support companies that prioritize safety and transparency in their ingredients.
3. **Advocate for better chemistry education** – Encourage universities to incorporate green chemistry principles into their curricula.
4. **Consider the environmental impact** – Choose products that are not just safe for us, but also for our planet.
5. **Rethink beauty standards** – Challenge societal norms that prioritize appearance over health.

As Warner notes, "Fear is a motivator to communicate, but not to solve the problem ... if you have no hope of solving the problem."¹⁴ Let's move beyond fear and toward action. By working together – consumers, companies, legislators and scientists – we can create a safer, healthier future for ourselves and our planet. It's time to clean up our act and embrace a new definition of beauty that values health, sustainability and authenticity above all else.

Sources and References

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