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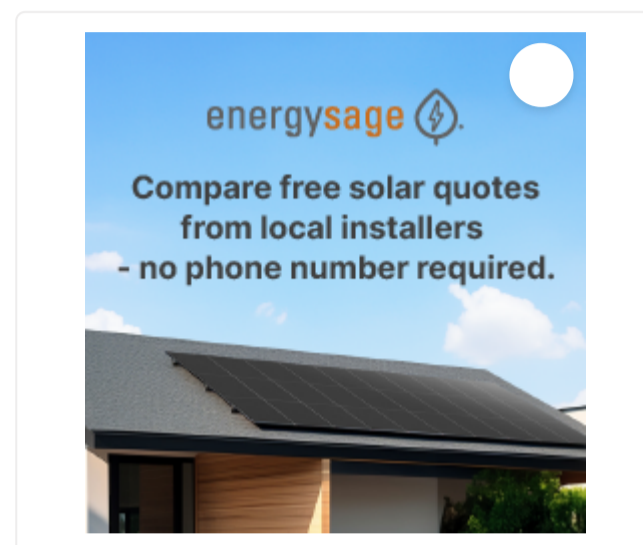
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# Killer Beauty: The Hidden Dangers of Personal Care Products



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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The quest for killer looks continues to threaten women’s health. Despite growing awareness of the negative health impact of many industrial beauty product ingredients, you still need to take time to understand whether what you buy in the beauty and

personal care section of the store will harm you. Today, women also have the political power and growing calls for ingredient disclosure regulations on their side when working to influence the beauty industry.

For millennia, the quest to become a killer beauty has been one that could kill you. From ancient Romans to England's first Queen Elizabeth, women's faces [were smeared with lead](#) to achieve a pale complexion. A century ago, American women ingested arsenic wafers with the same goal in mind. Unfortunately, today's beauty products are not much less likely to contain harmful chemicals than in the days when [wrinkle creams were radioactive](#). And the worst part is that it's still completely legal for manufacturers to include toxic ingredients.

Because people use beauty products in small quantities and typically don't ingest them, there is far less outcry over [paraphenylenediamine in hair dyes](#), for example, than [undeclared allergens](#) in food labels. [Environmental injustice](#) is also a factor in the decades-long refusal to regulate the beauty industry. Most beauty products are consumed by women; and many of the most toxic, like hair straighteners, are primarily used by African Americans. For example, [formaldehyde](#) is a [volatile organic compound](#) (VOC) that triggers asthma and even at low levels of exposure can cause irritation and sensitization of the skin, eyes, nose, and throat. It is a known [human carcinogen](#), associated with nasal cancers and leukemia, earning it a place on the [Red List](#) of "worst in class" materials the green building industry tries to avoid.

The beauty industry has no such qualms. Formaldehyde is a regular ingredient in hair straighteners. The National Institutes of Health [found](#) an increased risk of uterine cancer among women who regularly used formaldehyde-based hair-straightening products and increasing rates of uterine cancer among [Black women](#) in the U.S. generally.

## Beauty Rules

The U.S. is [notorious](#) for its lack of regulation of personal care products. While the European Union maintains a list of more than [2,400 banned or restricted chemicals](#), U.S. law restricts the use of only 11 substances. U.S. federal law is so far behind on consumer safety that a telling [piece of legislation](#) was put forward in Connecticut a few years ago calling for any cosmetics in the state to "meet the chemical safety standards established by the European Union." The bill [did not pass](#).

The U.S. routinely prioritizes corporate freedom over public safety. But the health impacts of toxic beauty products are real. Revelations about [asbestos in baby powder](#) and [carcinogens in dry shampoos](#), coupled with increasing awareness of environmental justice, has led to increased attention.

Some progress has happened, however. The [Modernization of Cosmetics Regulation Act \(MoCRA\)](#), passed in 2022, was the most significant update of federal guidelines around the use of chemicals in beauty products in about 60 years. It expanded the FDA's power to oversee and approve ingredients, as well as calling for more disclosures about ingredients used in products, including mandatory self-reporting by beauty brands when they discover adverse reactions. But The Food and Drug Administration's authority remains relatively limited and is still largely defined by the terms of [the 1938 Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act](#).

In 2023, Representatives Ayanna Pressley (D-Mass.) and Shontel Brown (D-Ohio) [requested](#) an FDA investigation of chemical hair straighteners. Now, the Food and Drug Administration has announced a [proposal to ban](#) the use of formaldehyde as an ingredient in hair straightening products.

The FDA's [notice of proposed rule-making](#) does not yet qualify as federal action. The text of the proposed rule will not be released [until July 2024](#), at which time the rule will be open to public comment before finalization. Only after the rule is finalized will formaldehyde be banned from hair smoothing and straightening products.

## What Can You Do?

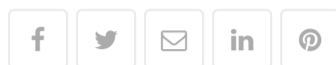
Who you vote for to represent you in Congress does make a difference in the issues that Congress addresses.

Notably, the Representatives who initiated the formaldehyde ban are both Black women. The Senators who have been most involved in legislation to improve the safety of beauty products are all women: Susan Collins (R-Maine), the late Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) both introduced [personal care safety](#) bills over several Congressional sessions, while Patty Murray (D-Wash.) inserted MoCRA in the Omnibus Appropriations Act to [get it passed](#).

Mark your calendar for July and revisit the formaldehyde [rule on the federal register](#) to obtain the guidelines for submitting a public comment. Commenting in support of the hair straightener formaldehyde ban is a start, but all kinds of beauty products from [nail polish](#) to [shampoo](#) contain formaldehyde and other known carcinogens. They are often [unlabeled](#) or listed under unfamiliar names on ingredient lists. As usual, for American consumers who want to [shop safely](#), it is still buyer beware.

You might opt to take the [DIY approach](#). But if making your own beauty products is too much, you can still vote with your dollars. The [Environmental Working Group's](#) EWG Verified and Skin Deep databases rate personal products and cosmetics based on their inclusion of EWG's chemicals of concern, manufacturing process standards, and transparency in identifying ingredients.

MoCRA has made regulating ingredients in beauty products easier. But FDA still [needs funding](#) to implement the expanded regulation. And MoCRA has numerous loopholes that need to be closed. Let your [representatives in Congress](#) know that you support the full implementation of MoCRA and legislation, like the [Safer Beauty Bill package](#) introduced last year by Rep. Janice D. Schakowsky (D-Ill.), that would ban formaldehyde, parabens and phthalates, and increase transparency around chemical ingredients in beauty products.



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Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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