Cosmetics, "Carcinogens," and Concern

By ACSH Staff — January 13, 2006

For the past fifty years -- dating back to the first national "carcinogen" scare, over cranberries during Thanksgiving 1959 -- Americans have been told that there are cancer causing agents in food, water, air, and various consumer products like paper towels, plastic toys, medical equipment -- even typewriter correction fluid.

It is only relatively recently that the carcinogen scare has expanded to include cosmetics. The Environmental Working Group has the dubious distinction of taking the lead on scare-mongering about "carcinogens" in lipstick, nail polish, deodorant, make-up, and more. Sadly, advocacy organizations like the Breast Cancer Fund have joined in the scare campaign, suggesting that cosmetics put women at risk of breast cancer and advising that we use only "natural" beauty care products we can make ourselves using brown rice, dried comfrey, oregano, aniseed, powdered arrowroot, and apricot kernel oil. (Of course, given the omnipresence of naturally occurring toxins and "carcinogens," [1] including the presence of cyanide in apricot kernels, a toxicologist could have a field day with these "natural" products.)

This week brought a new cosmetic alarmist, Christine Farlow, who describes herself as a "chiropractor and nutritionist." Her new book, Dying to Look Good: The Disturbing Truth About What's Really in Your Cosmetics, Toiletries, and Personal Care Products, informs us that we are "unknowingly poisoning" ourselves with "many cancer-causing ingredients in today's cosmetics."

As usual, the description "cancer-causing" is based on evidence from high-dose animal tests. As ACSH has pointed out for decades, these tests are carried out in a way that bears so little resemblance to normal human exposures as to make them, taken alone, virtually irrelevant to human health [2]. The animal tests involve the ingestion of huge, near-lethal doses of chemicals, whereas cosmetics contain trace levels of chemicals, which (with the possible exception of lipstick) are applied to the skin, not eaten.

The bottom line, Farlow's assertions to the contrary, is that there is no evidence that cosmetics as typically used increase the risk of any form of cancer in humans [3].

The fact that advocates like Farlow can use animal cancer tests to alarm consumers about cosmetic safety is yet another reason ACSH urges federal regulatory agencies (specifically the Environmental Protection Agency) to cease and desist in categorizing chemicals as "possible" or "probable" human carcinogens based exclusively on animal cancer tests.

Dr. Elizabeth M. Whelan is president of the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH.org [4], HealthFactsAndFears.com [5]).