Can your lipstick cause diabetes? No

By ACSH Staff — August 15, 2012

Friday the 13th seemed like it would be really bad luck for American women, as the toxic alarm was blared all over the news: scientists at a prestigious hospital had found a link between a chemical present in many cosmetics [1], and diabetes! And the recent rise in obesity rate has heightened everyone’s awareness of the dire consequences of obesity-related diabetes. [2]

So now, would doctors be advising women who use cosmetics (that is, all the female patients of primary care physicians) to go without makeup? Lipstick? Fragrance? Nail polish, self-tanners, even shampoo? That would be a most unlikely and unwelcome scenario. Thankfully, despite the alarmist, breathless headlines and TV sound bites, the study upon which the hysteria was based was flawed beyond any semblance of scientific validity. The researchers analyzed the level of the chemical actually found in urine specimens from over 2,000 women and tried to find a relationship between the chemicals, called phthalates (pronounced tha-lates) and diabetes.

See also my organization’s discussion [3] of this topic: "From eyeliner to diabetes? Not so fast."

"When I say tried, I mean they really, really tried. And in this type of scientific investigation, if one tries hard enough to find some association, one often can. But the methods used and the conclusions they drew are not based on real evidence of a true causal relationship between phthalates and diabetes. The types of chemical they found were not even the type of phthalate found in cosmetics! And a one-moment-in-time analysis like this one cannot possibly support the authors self-promoting assertions, such as diabetes linked to cosmetics, a scare story eagerly swallowed and spit out by the media.

These days, everyone on the media health beat seems to be caught up in spreading anxiety about all the toxic chemicals all around us: in our food, water, air and our beauty products. This dovetails neatly with the increasing (and real) concern about obesity and its common, lethal sidekick, diabetes. But let’s keep it real: obesity is caused by over-consumption of calories, especially modern extra-large portion sizes of everything; matched with too little exercise. If we all got off our behinds more, stepped away from the keyboards and played some ball or ran, or even walked, the obesity epidemic would be stymied.

But to many, diet and exercise are a tough sell; it’s easier to blame chemicals of one sort or another, relying on such poorly done and over-hyped studies as this one to promote an agenda instead of lifestyle education. The good news: our cosmetic products and fragrances have been in widespread and safe use for many decades, and there’s nothing to fear when using them as always. So, to your good health, and beauty!

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[2] http://ehp03.niehs.nih.gov/article/fetchArticle.action?articleURI=info%3...