

Be afraid of your nail polish, says the NYTimes' Ask Well column. Really?

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be taken over by an environmental writer. This week's Science section of the *New York Times* included an advisory about cosmetics entitled, [Is nail polish harmful?](#) ^[1] So what sort of answer would you expect? What if you substituted artichokes for nail polish? Certainly too much H₂O can be harmful: more people die from too much water (drowning) than from many other chemical exposures.

There's an old, respected dictum in epidemiology and toxicology: The dose makes the poison anything is a poison (toxin) at a high enough dose, while a poison can be tolerated if the exposure is low enough. Our ad hoc Times health columnist, Deborah Blum (now best known for her recent best-seller, *The Poisoners Handbook*), apparently failed that part of her training or more likely, was talked out of it by her pals at the advocacy group, Campaign for Safe Cosmetics (CSC), who have never recognized the differences between toxic levels and trace levels of anything. Their parent organization, another advocacy group called The Environmental Working Group (EWG), likes to issue periodic alarms about trace levels of pesticides on perfectly safe fruits and vegetables, and occasionally spices up their warnings with announcements about toxic toys (usually around Christmas).

Ms. Blum refers to several chemicals often found (at minuscule levels) in nail polish as she says,

often referred to as the toxic trio formaldehyde, toluene and DBP, a phthalate, as her main causes for concern. She calls formaldehyde a known carcinogen. Well, it was recently added to the federal carcinogen list, which also includes estrogen and sunlight, the studies linking it to cancer were done in funeral workers and lab techs whose exposure to the chemical were at high levels over a lifetime, and even then the increased cancer rates were quite minimal. None of these chemicals have ever been shown to be toxic to humans at typical exposures, including those in cosmetics even lipstick.

ACSH s Dr. Gilbert Ross had this comment: I d certainly advise anyone who uses nail polish parents, kids, workers not to drink any. That would likely cause some toxicity. However, the threats to health from nail polish, as with other cosmetics and personal care products targeted by EWG and CSC, range from hypothetical to nil, generally based on high-dose rodent toxicity studies. Let s hope the Times Well column is soon restored to an author with actual scientific expertise.

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