Cosmetics have a long history of safe use by millions of people, and most of the recent claims of health hazards are overstated or unfounded. The cosmetic industry bears the main responsibility for the safety of its products. The results of safety tests are not always publicly available. Cosmetic manufacturers have internal processes and test protocols designed to ensure the safety of the products they manufacture. In addition, the FDA oversees ingredient testing and advises the industry on ingredient safety. Very few incidents of injury or illness from cosmetics have ever been reported, and most of these involve irritation or mechanical injury (such as scratching the eye with a mascara wand).

No data exist linking cosmetics with cancer, reproductive effects, or genetic damage in humans. Much of the anxiety surrounding the health "hazards" of cosmetics stems from misperception regarding how safety testing is done. High-dose tests performed on laboratory animals, especially rodents, are often misinterpreted when it comes to predictions about human health hazards, particularly since cosmetics usually contain trace levels of the chemicals of concern. 9

For the story from the American Council on Science and Health.

Final Thought

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Health Claims Against Cosmetics: How Do They Look in the Light?

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Who's Making Sure Cosmetics Are Safe?

Some activist groups have complained that the industry is largely self-policed. This is true to some degree, as the federal government does not subject cosmetics to the same premarket approval process that it uses for pharmaceutical products. This does not mean, however, that cosmetics are not carefully tested and regulated. The industry itself has an interest in rigorously testing chemicals on its own before marketing them — safety testing is essential if a company wants to conduct business in the U.S. without the burden of product recalls, consumer complaints, and lawsuits. By law, any cosmetic intended for use on the skin must be tested for safety. If a product does not have such a label, it indicates that the company has evaluated the product and certified its safety.

In addition, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) plays a significant role in ensuring cosmetic safety. The FDA has the authority to ban or restrict ingredients in cosmetics. If the agency is concerned about the safety of a product, it has the power to mandate warning labels on products, issue warning letters to cosmetic companies, and work with manufacturers to implement nationwide product recalls if necessary. The FDA has the ability to inspect cosmetic manufacturing facilities, seize illegal products, and to prosecute violators of safety laws. The Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act prohibits the marketing of adulterated cosmetic products, placing the burden of safety directly on the cosmetic industry.

The Cosmetic Ingredient Review Board (CIR) provides another important mechanism for ensuring the safety of cosmetics. The CIR is an independent scientific body consisting of scientists who have been nominated by consumer, scientific, medical, governmental, and industry groups. Although the CIR receives funding from the Cosmetic, Toiletry, and Fragrance Association, it maintains total editorial and voting independence from this group. The CIR assesses the ingredients used in cosmetics, publishes its results in a peer-reviewed scientific journal, and makes recommendations to cosmetics manufacturers.

The Bottom Line: The FDA oversees cosmetic safety and has the power to remove unsafe products. The CIR tests and evaluates ingredients, and it is in the best interest of the industry to follow their recommendations.

How Are Cosmetics Tested for Safety?

When a new product is being developed, scientists conduct an extensive review of the scientific studies that have already been published on its ingredients. When the existing literature does not provide adequate information about a product’s safety, researchers may want to proceed with laboratory studies, either on humans, on animals, or in test tubes. Experiments that use skin as the primary route of exposure are the most helpful, since this is the most common way in which humans come into contact with cosmetic products. These tests determine both whether a product will cause irritation and its ability to move through the skin. It is also important to test the effects of one-time oral exposure, however, in case of accidental ingestion of the product.

Studies on cosmetic ingredients are performed with several goals in mind. Scientists attempt to identify any potential hazards of the product, including effects on the reproductive and respiratory systems, effects of the product on the eyes in case of accidental splash, and potential to cause cancer with long-term exposure. By identifying possible hazards, scientists can make a risk assessment for the product, which typically includes an extra margin of safety to protect against unexpected adverse effects.

The Bottom Line: Cosmetics undergo several types of safety testing before entering the market.