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Teenagers learn of dangerous beauty

Asian American youth raise awareness of toxic chemicals in cosmetics

By Mona Chang

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One by one, the 20 teenagers take beauty products from their backpacks and purses: Chapstick, makeup, scented lotion, eyeshadow, mascara and deodorant.

Joanna Chang, 15, counts more than 12 products she uses every day, from shampoo and conditioner to moisturizer and lip gloss. She dips her hair about four times a year — her goal is a hair colorist — and plans to get blowd highlights before she starts school as a senior at San Leandro High School.

Joanna and her peers are part of *Stayers in Action* for the Cosmetic Empowerment, a group for young Asian American women that began meeting this summer as part of Oakland-based Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, where they are examining chemical ingredients used in cosmetics.

Many are surprised to find that the products they use every day could contain toxic ingredients.

"I didn't know that most of the products have chemicals inside that could affect my body," Joanna said.

"The cosmetic products they are advertising are in a gray area — not food we eat but the air we breathe. They are products most people use every day, but the FDA does not have authority to regulate cosmetic products."

"ACRJ's toxics and cosmetics project fits with a larger effort in the Bay Area and across the country accepting to address legal regulation."

"People might assume that everything they buy at the store is safe," said Javi Shih, founder of the Matrix Cancer Project.

Her group started organizing teenagers in Marin County and recently convened a safe cosmetics summit, bringing together a group of like-minded people, including policy-makers and cosmetic company representatives, interested in making safer products.

She said the good thing about cosmetics safety is that alternative products exist, and unlike the many other toxins in the environment, it is something consumers can control.

"You can make changes overnight," she said.



ERICA PANEHIRA and JOANNA CHUNG (above), both 15, talk about the chemicals in cosmetic products that can do damage to their bodies. Many of the teenagers get pedicures (below) in the summer, though nail products might contain toxic ingredients.



Carcinogens in personal care products

Chemical ingredients found in personal care products that are linked to cancer or cause reproductive harm, including birth defects, according to the state's Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment under California's Environmental Protection Agency.

Coal tar is a carcinogen and contains a number

Asian American youth study cosmetic toxins

TOXIN, from Local 1

latives said their cosmetics are safe.

"That is what we strive to do every day, to make sure that we provide products that are safe," said Randy Pollack, lobbyist for the Cosmetic, Toiletry and Fragrance Association.

On the legislative end, a bill by state Sen. Carole Migden, D-San Francisco, would require cosmetic companies to disclose any hazardous ingredients used in cosmetics products sold in California. Senate Bill 484 does not ban any ingredients, nor does it require any labeling, but it is seen as a step in the right direction by safe cosmetics advocates.

Migden's bill has faced a lot of opposition from the \$35 billion cosmetics industry, particularly from the CTFA, which spent \$500,000 in 2004 to successfully lobbying against legislation that would have banned a group of chemical compounds called phthalates, found in nail polish, acetone, hair spray and other products.

The industry relies on the Cosmetic Ingredient Review, a self-regulatory body funded by the industry, but only about 10 percent of the ingredients used in products sold on the market have been tested, according to safe cosmetics advocates.

"Fragrance" and "flavoring," which is what you can find a lot of harmful ingredients," said Gretchen Lee of San Francisco-based Breast Cancer Fund. She said this is because the companies take advantage of because, for example, the formula for certain fragrance is considered a trade secret.

Ingredients such as formaldehyde, di-ethyl-toluyl phthalate, coal tar and toluene have been deemed by a state agency to cause cancer or reproductive harm, such as birth defects. The same ingredients can still be found in products sold on the shelf, albeit in small amounts — in moisture, shampoo, nail polish and other cosmetics — since no state or federal agency regulates how chemicals are used in cosmetic products.

According to a study conducted by the Environmental Working Group based in Washington, D.C., more than one-third of cosmetic products they surveyed contained at least one ingredient listed as a possible carcinogen.

Industry officials, however, say these chemicals would require a very long intake to cause any harm.

"Just because you have a trace amount of something in the product doesn't mean it is harmful," Pollack said. He said there have been no studies to show that using several cos-

metic products a day over an extended period of time causes any harm, but others contend that trace amounts of toxic ingredients could add up.

The IRIS list is very restrictive, established with the title 44 in my eyeshadow really adds up over the course of 50 years," Lee said. "It should take the 100 percent definitive proof that these ingredients are carcinogenic. That could take 40 to 50 years."

Unlike other environmental toxins, consumers can choose to buy safer products, but currently, that would require a lot of label-reading, often in microscopic type.

One idea proposed at the cosmetics summit is a universal logo, along the lines of the "USDA approved organic" label, that could be placed on products that are deemed safe.

For some, the issue of safe cosmetics concerns goes beyond the consumer level.

"Our concern is more about the Vietnamese nail salon worker population that we've outsourced to," said Jaiha Lou of Oakland-based Asian Health Services, a supporter of Migden's bill. "They work with these products on a daily basis, and their exposures are much higher than the consumer population."

There are 83,000 licensed manicurists in California, and 60 percent are of Vietnamese descent. Lou said that many are recent immigrants, and most are women of childbearing age.

"Benzofl," "hexile," and "aluminum" are all words that I've seen in articles on a large piece of white paper in ACRJ's small office in Oakland's Chinatown. They are adjectives that, perhaps, all young women want to associate with. They are words they think of after looking at a shampoo ad when they are asked, "How is this product supposed to make you feel?"

Next to the column of adjectives, she has written "cancer irritation," "toxic" and "bad for babies." Words that describe the subtle effects of some of the products in the group is examining. They are looking closely at an ad for Herbal Essence shampoo, which more than half of the teenagers said they used. The ad says the product is "a totally organic experience."

Lee has worked with ACRJ for six years and has been doing a lot of work in hair or nail salons. She has a year to go at Sacramento City College before she will take the state's cosmetology board exam.

For her, learning about cosmetic safety is more than just an activity to do in the summer. If she works as a stylist or manicurist, it could affect her life.

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