

Researchers study how personal care products affect health

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Emily S. Barrett, associate professor (left) and Adana A.M. Llanos, (right) are working together to examine how personal care products affect health. Credit: Rutgers University

Emily Barrett and Adana Llanos, researchers in the Rutgers School of Public Health, have teamed up to find out how chemicals in products used every day—from soap and shampoo to perfume and body lotions—may adversely affect our health. The two discuss why more information and further research is needed to reduce exposure to harmful products and how choosing greener and safer options may be the answer to better health.

Why study personal care products that are used by consumers every day?

Barrett: I've been studying chemicals in the environment for a long time. Many of these chemicals come from the [products](#) that we buy and use in our daily lives, including our personal care products. Things like our shampoos, our perfumes, our lotions and our soaps. And we are increasingly finding out that some of these chemicals are bad for us in a variety of ways. Many personal care products contain phthalates, which are chemicals that are widely used in formulations for personal care products because they are so good at holding on to color and especially scent. Our work has shown that moms who have higher levels of phthalates in their bodies during pregnancy are more likely to have children with language and behavioral issues as well as changes in reproductive development. We have also observed that high exposure to phthalates in pregnancy is associated with gestational diabetes, gestational hypertension and even preterm birth.

How did you decide to join forces?

Llanos: Our collaboration happened very organically. I recently published a paper that focused on the prevalence and patterns of use of hair products and the associations with [breast cancer risk](#). We found striking results that suggest increased risk of breast cancer among [black](#)

[women](#) who used hair dyes, specifically darker shades of dye. Also, there were some observable differences by race. We also found among [white women](#) who reported using [chemical](#) relaxers or hair straighteners also have higher risk of breast cancer. That was a pretty novel finding. It reinvigorated an interest in how chemicals in hair dyes and other types of [personal care products](#) may affect our health.

One of the things we really wanted to do is to start recording specific products that people use every day and from there we can start looking in depth at why these products might be harmful.

What do you hope to achieve from your research?

Barrett: We are trying to understand how people choose the products they do, whether they are concerned or aware that there are potentially harmful chemicals in those products. I think a lot of people are under the false impression that if a product makes it to the shelves of your supermarket or your drugstore, then it's totally safe for you. There is not a whole lot of testing to make sure that the ingredients in your products won't have an adverse impact on your health. There might be invisible long-term health impacts because many of the chemicals in these products can interfere with the body's natural hormone systems, cause inflammation and may contribute to the development of hormone-sensitive cancers. Lots of things on the shelf are essentially untested and by putting these products on our bodies every day, we are unwittingly participating in a human experiment.

Do men and women have the same level of risk?

Barrett: Men on average use fewer than 10 products a day, while women use an average of upwards 20 products a day. Twenty products that have long ingredient lists that may include chemicals that interfere with your

hormones, chemicals that are linked to cancer, to developmental toxicity and—we're putting them all over our bodies.

Llanos: I would also add that men's exposure to some of the endocrine disrupting chemicals and how they contribute to men's health has been understudied in the literature. Men have been virtually ignored. This study allows us to reach a large, diverse sample size that also includes men.

What advice do you have for purchasing personal care products?

Barrett: In general, organic products are usually a safer choice. But individuals should ask themselves if they need to use so many products. We know that the more products you use, the higher concentrations of chemicals are in your body. The Environmental Working Group's Skin-Deep Cosmetics Database includes nearly 80,000 products from over 2000 brands and provides information on the chemicals contained in each and the potential health risks they pose.

Llanos: I don't think we have enough information on traditional and organic products. Awareness of what products we are using, and the potential [health](#) risks is important and will allow consumers to make smarter and healthier choices.

More information: Click [here](#) to learn how to participate in the study.

Provided by Rutgers University

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