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Skin Deep?

Last year I read a book called “Ecoholics” by Adria Vasil. It made me think hard about what I put on my skin everyday, and also what was going down my drains and into the water treatment system.

Since then, I have put a lot of time into finding safer products both for me and for the environment. Unfortunately, it is not always easy to know what ingredients are in the personal care products we use and whether they are safe or not. Ingredient lists are often long and detailed, with chemicals cleverly disguised as “fragrance” or colour numbers. Though some widely used undesirable ingredients are easier to spot, such as parabens, phthalates and sodium lauryl/laureth sulphate. Parabens are a group of compounds used as anti-microbial preservatives in cosmetics products, including underarm deodorants. Phthalates are chemical plasticizers found in everything from shampoo to paint. Sodium laureth sulphate contains a cancer-causing carcinogen called 1,4-Dioxane and it can be found in cosmetics, hair care products, and even in toothpaste. The latter was where I started my personal care product overhaul.

For as long as I can remember I have had an adverse reaction to toothpaste – a burning sensation in my throat that made me cough for several minutes after brushing. I soon discovered a brand of toothpaste made by a Canadian company called Green Beaver. By no means is my experience a scientific experiment, but since using the new toothpaste I no longer suffer adverse reactions. Coincidentally, the Green Beaver toothpaste does not contain any sodium laureth sulfates.

Now, I may be an environmentalist, but there is no question that I am also a girl! And girls like me enjoy wearing makeup, so this was my next order of business. Before starting my search I set out some criteria for myself: no animal testing; less harm to the environment; and less irritating to the skin. For me, the results have meant switching primarily to mineral makeup. I have found many companies who sell mineral makeup and many of them offer sample sizes, which is great for testing different brands. Mineral cosmetics vary in price, and overall they do cost a bit more than many widely marketed commercial makeup brands. But for me, the added cost is a small price to pay. Mineral makeup is far less irritating to my skin and eyes; it lasts longer and is less harmful to the environment.

It is important to remember that this personal care products issue is not just limited to the female gender. All the products we and our families use, such as shampoo, soap, conditioner, moisturizer, shaving cream, etc.; which we tend to think of as being rather benign, in fact, are not. Our bodies are amazing things and unfortunately the chemical compounds found in these products go much further than ‘skin deep’.

Many chemicals are absorbed through the skin and have been found in human urine and even breast milk. They not only seep into our waterways through our drains, but also through human excretions. Some ingredients have been linked to negative impacts on wildlife. For example, chemicals that target the hormone system, like phthalates, have been linked to feminization of fish and other aquatic life.

Many widely used personal care and cosmetic products contain carcinogens, petrochemicals, lead, mercury, and other chemicals, which cause irritation to the skin and have been linked to certain cancers. Phthalates are being linked to reproductive defects, and researchers are learning more about parabens found in breast cancer tumours. And though each individual beauty product may contain low doses of such chemicals, it is still not clearly understood what results come from constant exposure to these small amounts over time.

To find a great listing for mineral makeup and many other safer and more natural personal care products go to www.safecosmetics.org. You can visit Green Beaver Company at www.greenbeaver.com and purchase their products locally at Aura Whole Foods. There are several local businesses who carry greener products, as well as some vendors at the Boyce Farmers' Market.

Valerie Hillier is a Frederictonian who believes in taking action on environmental issues. She suggests doing some research first as you start your journey towards finding environmentally-friendly personal care products that best suit your needs.