

# Cosmetics: Tips

Most people use a range of cosmetics every day including: make-up, moisturisers, soap, perfumes, deodorants, talcum powders, hair removal creams, tanning solutions, whitening toothpastes, hair dyes and nail-polish removers. We are so familiar with cosmetics it can be easy to forget they contain chemicals that can be harmful.

## What does the label mean?

The law requires ingredients to be listed on cosmetic labels. This helps people compare products and identify ingredients they might be allergic or sensitive to; so they can avoid them.

Ingredients are not required to be listed on labels of: free samples, shop testers or products classified as therapeutic goods rather than cosmetics (for example, if a manufacturer makes a therapeutic claim like 'prevents sunburn' – the product is not a cosmetic).

Terms on labels can be confusing. For example:

- > **'Dermatologically proven'** or **'skin compatibility'** is used if a dermatologist has been involved at some stage of product development, or ingredients, potentially less irritating to eyes and skin, are included in the formulation. Importantly, these terms do not guarantee that the product will not affect your health.
- > **'Hypoallergenic'** or **'allergy tested'** is used if the product has been formulated to include fewer well-known skin allergens (trigger chemicals) or has undergone testing for allergy. However, there are no defined standards or tests required before these terms can be used on labels. Potential allergens may still be present. The incidence of allergy is very low considering the size of the entire population; therefore, many hundreds of people would need to be tested to find out if a product is really hypoallergenic. It cannot be guaranteed that you will never have an allergic reaction to a particular product.
- > **'Natural'** or **'organic'** does not necessarily mean safe, pure or clean. These terms mean the cosmetic contains ingredients extracted from plants (botanicals) or animal products, rather than being synthetic or chemically produced. Some chemicals occurring naturally in the environment, like arsenic, are very toxic. On the other hand, not all synthetic chemicals are harmful. In some cases, there is much less known about natural chemicals in plants and their tendency to cause allergy. 'Organic' may indicate that ingredients have been produced without pesticides, but this can be difficult to verify. Without more information, these terms are not good reasons for choosing which cosmetic to use.
- > **'Fragrance-free'** may be used if the product has no perceptible odour but 'unscented' products may contain small amounts of fragrance to mask the odour of other ingredients. In Australia, it is permitted for 'fragrance' to be listed on labels instead of listing the individual components that make up the fragrance—some of which you may be allergic to (for example, essential oils). This is not the case in the European Union where it has recently been made law for individual fragrance chemicals to be listed. This makes it easier for consumers, who are allergic to particular fragrances, to choose products.
- > **'Preservative-free'** may not necessarily be a healthy alternative. Preservatives in cosmetics are important to reduce the growth of micro-organisms like bacteria and mould. Imagine an avocado in a jar—it does not last very long!



- > **'Non-comedogenic'** means the product does not contain ingredients known to clog pores and possibly lead to acne.

### How can I reduce the risk of health effects from cosmetics?

- > Clean your hands and face before applying make-up.
- > Don't use eye make-up if you have an eye infection. If you do get an infection, replace your make-up with new products after the infection has cleared up.
- > Discard cosmetics if the colour, odour or consistency changes because this may mean the preservatives are no longer effective.
- > Don't use cosmetics on broken or infected skin.
- > Clean cosmetic applicators regularly with warm soapy water.
- > Keep cosmetics away from heat and sunlight.
- > Don't share your cosmetics, because everyone has different skin micro-organisms and cross-contamination can occur.
- > Don't use multi-use applicators or testers in shops—ask for fresh applicators or for tester openings to be cleaned with alcohol.
- > Avoid your allergens by checking the ingredient list and don't use products containing ingredients you have reacted to in the past (you may need to contact the manufacturer to confirm if your allergen is present in a product).
- > Don't add water or saliva to cosmetics to improve consistency.
- > Choose simpler products with fewer ingredients—the more ingredients, the more potential allergens.
- > If you are sensitive to fragrances, apply perfume to your clothes rather than

directly to your skin.

- > Keep your skin in good condition—it is your natural barrier to irritants and allergens. Avoid astringent soap and alcohol-based removers, toners and cleansers that dry skin making it prone to cracking. Dry skin is potentially vulnerable to dermatitis (eczema) and other types of inflammation.
- > Always follow cosmetic directions carefully. Using products incorrectly can have serious consequences like eye damage, burns and rashes. Irritation has occurred because people applied undiluted products (like antiseptics and bath oils) to their skin. More importantly, applying undiluted allergens (such as tea-tree oil) directly to skin can cause an allergy to develop. For the rest of the affected person's life, when that substance is reapplied, a skin rash will always occur.
- > Some products must not be used on children, pregnant women or people with compromised immune systems. A negative patch test (see below) does not over-rule these label warnings.
- > If you have experienced skin reactions in the past, and a new product contains ingredients you don't recognise, you can check your sensitivity by doing a simple home patch test. This way, if you do have an allergic reaction it will be confined to a small area which is easier to treat.

### Patch testing

1. Clean an area of skin on the inside of your forearm with soap and water.
2. Dab a small amount of cosmetic on the clean area and let it dry.
3. Leave the test area unwashed for at least 24 hours (ideally 48 hours), then wash gently with soap and water.
4. The cosmetic should not be used if the test area is red, scaly, itchy, hot or blistered.



Allergies to fragrances are best detected by applying the fragrance twice a day to the test area for up to four weeks.

It is commonly recommended to patch test 48 hours before each use of paraphenylenediamine (PPD)-containing hair dyes because allergies can develop with subsequent applications, even if you didn't react in previous patch tests. Follow the directions carefully—generally these dyes should be diluted to 10% of their original concentration before application to your skin.

### What should I do if I react to a cosmetic?

1. Stop using the cosmetic immediately and wash off with copious amounts of water; but, keep it nearby so you can provide the name and ingredients to a medical professional if required.
2. If the product has been accidentally consumed by a child and they are showing symptoms; this is a medical emergency and you must call **000 (112)** from mobile phones). If the child doesn't have symptoms, call the **Poisons Information Service ph. 13 1126** for advice.  
Remember to **KEEP COSMETICS OUT OF THE REACH OF CHILDREN.**
3. If someone has collapsed or is having trouble breathing they may be having an anaphylactic reaction. This is a medical emergency and you must call **000 (112)** from mobile phones).
4. Skin reactions usually clear up after a few days, but if your symptoms are severe or prolonged, contact your doctor. Avoid heat which may make the condition itchier. Cool substances, like ice packs, can be soothing. Medical treatment from your doctor may include:

- > anti-inflammatory creams to control itching, swelling and redness
- > oral prescription medications like corticosteroids, antihistamines or antibiotics (if blistered skin becomes infected)
- > referral to a dermatologist

5. Call the **Adverse Medicines Event Line ph 1300 134 237**. This is a national phone line where consumers can report undesirable health effects from using cosmetics and toiletries. It is important to report your experience so information about the same product (or similar ones) can be gathered. Government agencies responsible for controlling cosmetic ingredients and labels can then be made aware of potential public health risks.
6. Contact the manufacturer to advise them of your reaction. If they receive a number of calls about a product they are more likely to initiate an investigation.

### Where can I get more information?

Cosmetics and your health

[www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs/PDF-files/ph-factsheet-cosmetics-and-your-health.pdf](http://www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs/PDF-files/ph-factsheet-cosmetics-and-your-health.pdf)

Cosmetics and the law  
(e.g. labelling requirements)

[www.nicnas.gov.au/Current\\_Issues/Cosmetics.asp](http://www.nicnas.gov.au/Current_Issues/Cosmetics.asp)

[www.accc.gov.au/content/index.phtml/itemId/323594](http://www.accc.gov.au/content/index.phtml/itemId/323594)

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### For more information

#### Scientific Services Branch Public Health

PO Box 6, Rundle Mall  
Adelaide SA 5000  
Tel 08 8226 7100  
Fax 08 8226 7102

[www.health.sa.gov.au](http://www.health.sa.gov.au)

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