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Cosmetics

The most frequently reported side effect in relation to use of cosmetic products is adverse skin reactions. About 10% of an adult population will experience skin problems from the use of cosmetic products over a five-year-period¹. The most severe problems are related to contact allergy primarily caused by fragrances and preservatives, but also hair dyes cause significant problems in some countries.

An increasing trend of reported allergy/hypersensitivity to cosmetics have been found in a population based study and similar results have been obtained by allergy tests in the general population^{2,3}. Allergy testing performed in a sample of the adult Danish population showed that the risk of contact sensitivity to cosmetic related allergens had increased significantly from 2.4% in 1990 to 5.8% in 1998³. More than 80% of those who develop allergy to cosmetic ingredients are healthy individuals without any prior skin disease. Cosmetic related allergy is two to three times more frequent in women compared with men and most frequent in the younger age groups.

Focus have been on contact allergy to fragrance ingredients in cosmetics in the recent years. The reason has been that fragrance ingredients are the most frequent causes of contact allergy to cosmetics. Further fragrances account for 10-15% of all allergic reactions in eczema patients on a European level⁴. An increasing trend of allergy to fragrance ingredients has been detected all age groups of eczema patients including children in Denmark⁵. The composition of perfumes have been regarded a trade secret and therefore very little knowledge have been available of how consumers were exposed. It has been a general held believe that small and safe amounts of fragrance ingredients were present in consumer products. Through public funded research it has been elucidated that well-known allergens were present in most cosmetic products. In some products the concentrations were high and exceeding the safety limits applied by the fragrance industry itself. This applied especially to hydro-alcoholic products, such as prestige perfumes and children's toy perfume^{6,7}.

Recently new allergen constituents have been detected in natural fragrance compounds that are widely used and which cause many allergic reactions⁸. It shows that the problems in fragrance/cosmetic allergy are far from mapped out.

The past years several initiatives have been taken by the EU-Commission to improve the safety of cosmetic products and measures as ingredient labelling, restriction in use and prohibitions are been discussed.

The fragrance story exemplify that detailed knowledge about exposure is a prerequisite to identify ingredients of potential concern and that a public monitoring of disease related to specific exposures is required. No such officially independent monitoring systems are at work presently. An area for future safety concerns is the wide exposure of children through cosmetics products, and considerations should be given to set special standards of safety for this product categories.

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