

Chemicals under the spotlight: act now to protect the “reach” of European reforms

Over 30,000 chemicals are currently on the European market without adequate environmental and health assessment. Industrially-made (synthetic) chemicals are found increasingly in our food, water, homes and bodies and the regulations in place are failing to protect people and the environment.

Concerns about some of these chemicals are that they build up in our bodies and the environment, they are or may be toxic, and they do or may disrupt endocrine system (hormones) in humans and wildlife. Some are linked to breast and other cancers, some are suspected of being behind other health problems such as asthma, allergies and reproductive disorders. These chemicals are in everyday use in pesticides, paints, plastics and household products.

The European Commission (EC) has just published draft legislation on the internet aimed at completely overhauling the control of chemicals made in or imported into the European Union (EU). Interested parties have until 2 July to submit their comments to the EC President, Romano Prodi. See the column on the right for suggested points to make and others to write to.

How can you reduce your risky chemicals use?

- Educate yourself on the environmental risks.
- Make sure your indoor environment is as free of synthetic chemicals as possible.
- Avoid synthetic fragrances, open windows, use essential oils and consider less toxic cleaning products - choose vinegar, lemon juice, baking soda and elbow grease.
- Cut down on the number of cosmetics and toiletries you use and choose those that appear to have fewest synthetic ingredients. Get WEN's cosmetics information pack for more on this.
- Read labels and look at ingredients. Don't put anything on your body you wouldn't put in your body.
- Ask questions, demand answers and suggest alternatives - Use your consumer power.

What the chemicals policy should include

A coalition of NGOs, including the European Environmental Bureau, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and WWF, has issued five demands:

- A full right to know, including which chemicals are present in products.
- A deadline by which all chemicals on the market must have their safety assessed by independent experts.
- All uses of a chemical should be approved and should be demonstrated to be safe beyond reasonable doubt.
- A phase-out of persistent or bio-accumulative chemicals.
- A requirement to substitute less safe chemicals with safer alternatives.

What's proposed?

The proposed reforms will replace 40 different pieces of current legislation. The declared aims are “to increase the protection of human health and the environment from exposure to chemicals while at the same time to maintain and enhance the competitiveness and innovative capability of the EU chemicals industry”.

Proposals are based on a White Paper published by the EC in February 2001. At its core is **REACH**, a system for the Registration, Evaluation and Authorisation of Chemicals.

This would:

- require manufacturers or importers to **register** chemicals in current use, phased over 11 years and starting with the most-used substances.
- require member states to **evaluate** the use of substances in their country, and suggest restrictions based on assessment of risks.
- restrict the use of about 1500 chemicals considered to be the most hazardous to human health and the environment (See box below). Uses would have to be **authorised** by the EC.
- make industry responsible for checking the safety of chemicals used in their products.
- subject chemicals to more stringent and modern testing.
- ban those chemicals that do not pass the tests.

A new Chemicals Agency is proposed to manage the REACH system.

The good news for consumers is that many everyday household products from paint, detergents and cosmetics to toys and computers would have to be checked for compliance when this new regulation is in place.

What does industry say?

Chemicals producers and users, as is to be expected, are already lobbying for exemptions and warning of a significant impact on business: job losses, high costs and trade barriers.

They say the planned measures would be a bureaucratic nightmare and would cost industry billions of euros over the next 10 years. For example, Judith Hackitt, Director General of the UK Chemical Industry Association, says on the European industry's website: “How many more studies do we need for the Commission to recognise that these proposals are a real threat to industry, jobs and quality of life in the EU?” The fact is job loss due to environmental regulations has been very limited in comparison to jobs lost through increased productivity. Sustainable jobs and products will enhance competitiveness, protect lives, communities and our environment. They are also scare-mongering that it will lead to more animal testing.

What does WEN say?

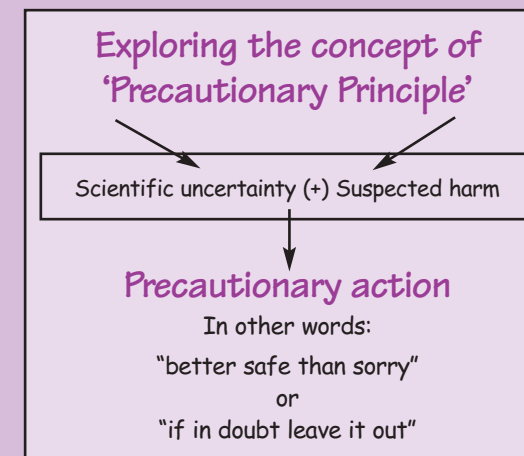
WEN welcomes the general direction of the new system, particularly that it will:

- shift the burden onto industry to prove chemicals are safe
- use the Precautionary Principle as fundamental to achieving its aims
- restrict the use of the most hazardous chemicals

But the proposals are still flawed and contain get-out clauses for industry.

WEN says if the precautionary principle is genuinely applied risky chemicals can be withdrawn, without the need for extensive new animal testing, and replaced with safer alternatives. It is calling for the EU to stand up to the chemical industry pressure and enforce the 'precautionary approach'. It is concerned that the proposals appear to make no reference to

the particular and different effects chemicals such as endocrine-disrupters have on women's health, nor require assessment and evaluation to take these factors into account.



Tight controls for most hazardous chemicals

The substances that will be most tightly controlled are those classified as:

CMRs - that do or may cause cancer, mutations or reproductive harm

PBTs - that persist in the environment, build up in our bodies (bioaccumulate) and are toxic

vPvBs - that are very persistent and very bioaccumulative.

Recent additions to the CMR list include two phthalates, DBP and DEHP, which were found in some of the cosmetic products WEN and two other groups had tested for the report *Pretty Nasty*, published last year. A European Directive passed in January means these two phthalates are now banned from use in cosmetics. Companies have about 18 months to comply.

Making your voice heard!

Write to:
President Romano Prodi
European Commission
BP-1049, Brussels
Belgium

Copy your letter to your
MP/MSP/AM & MEP

Tell them:

- The current EU reform of chemicals policy is a unique opportunity to create legislation ensuring the production and use of safer chemicals across the European Union.
- Chemicals which are of 'very high concern' must be 'authorised' for production to continue.
- Potential risks are sufficient grounds to refuse authorisation for hazardous chemicals.
- The current draft regulations allow hazardous chemicals to be produced and marketed even when viable, safe alternatives are available.
- You want the safety testing, risk assessment and evaluation process to take account of the way women and children are repeatedly exposed to a cocktail of chemicals and the different impacts this exposure may have on their health.
- Economic considerations must not be allowed to override environmental or health concerns.
- It is essential that substitution of chemicals of 'very high concern' is made mandatory whenever there is a safer alternative available.

Links: EC proposals: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/chemicals/index.htm>
European Environmental Bureau: <http://www.eeb.org/activities/chemicals/main>



Chemicals and cosmetics—what's the problem

For women and increasingly, men, cosmetics are an important health and environmental issue. More and more products are on the market and we feel under increasing pressure to use them. Not only are we putting chemical products into our bodies through 'cleaning' and 'enhancing' our skin, hair, teeth and nails, but we are also washing thousands of potentially toxic chemicals down the drain and into the wider environment. The products and their packaging are often made of petrochemicals and carry a raft of environmental implications. Many are capable of damaging hormone, immune and nervous systems. But it's not all doom and gloom - we can act positively. We can scrutinise the products we use and demand that manufacturers remove harmful chemicals. We can lobby government bodies to provide tougher legislation on labelling. And we can use simple, natural alternatives and safer products to stay beautiful - naturally. To help you take action on this complex subject, here is an introduction to some of the risky chemicals, the concerns and common terms used.

Did you know?

- Some 300 synthetic chemicals made since 1945 have been detected in human body tissues and secretions, including breast milk.
- It is estimated that 400 million tonnes of synthetic chemicals are manufactured annually worldwide.
- Over 1,000 new chemicals are produced each year.
- It is estimated that 5,000 – 10,000 chemicals are considered hazardous, of which 150-200 are thought to cause cancer.
- Only 14% of chemicals produced in large quantities in Europe have even a minimum set of safety data.

The right to know, the right to choose

- People should not have to give up using cosmetics and toiletries. But we should have the right to know that the products we choose are safe.
- All cosmetics and toiletries should be adequately safety tested and clearly labelled.
- Risky chemicals should be phased out of use.

Phthalates

Found in: hair sprays, perfume, nail polishes. Names to watch out for: anything ending in phthalate including - Dibutyl phthalate (DBP) and di(2-ethylhexyl) phthalate (DEHP), butyl benzyl phthalate (BBP or BzBP).

Used as: plasticisers to soften plastic, skin moisturisers and skin penetration enhancers in cosmetics.

Research indicates:

- DBP, DEHP and BBP are all known to cause serious reproductive and developmental effects in lab animals
- linked to premature breast development in young girls and interference with reproductive development in male foetuses
- some phthalates act like hormone disruptors
- growing evidence that phthalates can contribute to allergic disease - one Nordic study linked them to asthma - and other health problems.

Phthalates have been banned in the US from children's toys because of fears about future fertility.

Parabens

Found in: toiletries such as deodorants and moisturisers, and food stuffs such as pie fillings, beers, and jam.

Names to watch out for: Alkyl parahydroxy benzoates - butyl/methyl/ethyl/propyl/isobutyl paraben.

Used as: preservative.

Research indicates:

- parabens are oestrogen mimics
- they can penetrate the skin
- the effect of daily low level exposure to parabens in a number of different products is unknown.

Triclosan

Found in: deodorants, toothpaste, vaginal washes, clothing, liquid soaps, mouthwashes.

Names to watch out for: 5-chloro-2-(2,4-dichlorophenoxy)-phenol. May not be listed on label as contained in some trade-marked mixtures.

Used as: antibacterial

Research indicates:

- levels of triclosan have been found in human breast milk and in fish.
- dioxins (linked to cancer) are formed when it is manufactured or incinerated.

Toluene

Found in: lacquers and nail polish.

Names to watch out for: toluol or methylbenzene.

Research indicates:

- occupational studies show exposed women likely to experience spontaneous abortions



- skin irritant and may cause liver damage
- narcotic in high concentrations
- toluene is volatile, flammable and attacks the central nervous system, eyes, blood, liver, kidneys and skin.

Xylene

Found in: lacquers and nail polish.

Names to watch out for: xylol or dimethylbenzene

Research indicates:

- skin and respiratory tract irritant
- may cause liver damage
- narcotic in high concentrations

Formaldehyde

Used as: disinfectant, germicide, fungicide, defoamer, and preservative.

Found in: deodorants, nail varnish.

Names to watch out for: formalin, formal, and methyl aldehyde

Research indicates:

- suspected human carcinogen
- asthma may occur in sensitive individuals
- irritant to eyes and upper respiratory tract and mucous membrane
- individuals can become sensitised after repeated exposure.
- can damage DNA.

Alkylphenol ethoxylates

Used as: surfactants (lower the surface tension of liquids so they can foam or penetrate solids).

Found in: shampoos, hair colours, shaving gels.

Names to watch out for: nonylphenol, octylphenol.

Research indicates:

- hormone disruptors
- extremely toxic to fish
- bio-accumulative (they build up in body fat faster than they can be broken down)
- several alkylphenols are listed internationally to be phased out.

Acetone

Used as: nail polish remover, perfumes.

Research indicates:

- toxic if ingested
- irritates lungs
- causes nails to become brittle
- flammable.

Ethyl acetate

Found in: nail varnish

- irritates the eyes and the respiratory tract
- may effect the central nervous system
- irritating to eyes, nose and throat
- anaesthetic effects.

Perfume/Fragrances

- There are no legal restrictions on the quantities or combinations of fragrance chemicals that may be used in cosmetics.
- The ingredients or perfumes do not have to be listed.
- 95% of chemicals used in fragrances are synthetic compounds derived from petroleum.
- Fragrance chemicals appear on the label as 'Parfum' in the EU or 'Fragrance' in the USA.
- A typical cosmetic can contain 50-100 fragrances, which the industry claims to be too many to be easily listed.

Some terms explained

Endocrine system

- glands such as the pituitary and thyroid, that make hormones, among other activities.

Hormones

- regulate how your body grows and functions.

Oestrogen

- the female sex hormone.

Chemicals may affect the body in many different ways: attacking the endocrine system, disrupting the normal behaviour of hormones or affecting the nervous and immune systems or triggering cancer. An impact on one aspect may disrupt another, for instance, oestrogen mimics may disrupt hormone behaviour and increase susceptibility to breast cancer. A handy generic term for the chemicals we are most concerned about is 'hormone disruptors'.

What can you do?

- Order a copy of our new cosmetics briefing, out soon, for more information on the issue and plan a local fact-finding and lobbying campaign
- Use alternatives
- Avoid products containing risky ingredients
- Write to the manufacturer and complain
- Make your own
- Avoid overpackaged goods
- Avoid products tested on animals
- Don't be fooled by advertising.