

ALL ABOUT PARABENS

Though widely found in beauty products, they may not exactly spell good news for your skin. Next time on, remember to spot the 'paraben-free' tag.

By Pallavi Shankar



Shampoo. Check. Soap. Check. Shower gel. Check. Lip balm. Check. Moisturiser. Check. No, it's not a beauty shopping list. It's just a list of products with parabens in them. Sounds familiar and, yet, not too sure? While there has been a general shift from chemical-laden products to organic and botanical formulations, there is widespread lack of awareness about this potentially harmful component, found widely in skin, hair and makeup products.

BAD NEWS OR HARMLESS?

Their names are a mouthful—methylparaben, ethylparaben, propylparaben, butylparaben and isobutylparaben. They are a widely used group of preservatives found in personal care products, from sunscreens and shampoos to mascaras and lipsticks. Parabens are synthetically produced chemical compounds that stop fungus and bacteria from growing in products. Cheap and easy to manufacture, they are often considered indispensable to the cosmetic industry. But the last two decades have seen them fall from grace and attract substantial controversy.

It all began with a 1994 Danish study that revealed traces of parabens in samples of breast cancer tumours. Though it did not establish a direct

connect between parabens and cancer, it was proven that they do mimic estrogen, an excess of it, which in any case is not beneficial. "It's not possible to say if parabens actually cause tumors but they may certainly be associated with the overall rise in breast cancer," says Dr Jamuna Pai, Mumbai-based dermatologist. Reportedly, regular exposure to parabens among male

NEED TO KNOW?

This new skincare brand, educates consumers as it sells the jars and bottles

Puro, the Spanish word for pure, is a new beauty brand that's run by the NGO SaNiSA. It retails 100 per cent vegan and paraben-free bath and body products. The NGO educates consumers about the harmful effects of synthetic chemicals in cosmetics. They do this by conducting awareness campaigns, talks at rotaries and through distribution of information pamphlets. Puro is currently available at Eco Corner, Palladium, Mumbai and several online portals.

children is also known to decrease their sperm cell count as adults. "Butylparaben adversely affects the secretion of testosterone and the functioning of the male reproductive system," adds Dr Anup Dhir, senior consultant, Apollo Hospitals.

As of now, it is believed that they may play havoc with hormones. Amidst all the confusion, some clear facts have emerged. Existing skin problems like contact dermatitis and rosacea are aggravated by using paraben-related products, say Niyati Arya and Priyal Parikh, Puro. A study by researchers at Kyoto University in Japan, reveals that methylparaben increases skin ageing when exposed to UV rays. Although there is a possibility of future

studies giving parabens the clean chit, there is also a possibility of things being the other way round. But would you really want to wait for that judgement day to weed out paraben-laden products from your dresser?

BETTER SAFE THAN SORRY

A lot of beauty brands claim using parabens in small quantities, making their products safe. But considering women use an average of 20 grooming products in a day, it's time we start checking for labels like 'paraben-free' or 'no parabens'. The good news here is that a number of beauty brands have already started using natural alternatives in place of parabens. These include organic oils derived from sunflower, cocoa butter and peppermint that have a shelf-life of up to 18 months. "Forest Essentials uses natural alcohol extracted from medicinal flowers found in Tehri-Garhwal forests in their products as a preservative," discloses Mira Kulkarni, founder-owner of the Ayurveda-based brand. Vichy also has some paraben-free products like the sunscreen Capital Soleil Anti-shine Emulsion Dry Touch with SPF 50, ₹ 790. Nathalie Broussard, international director, Vichy, says they keep parabens away to minimise the risk of reactions.

While a lot of paraben-free products are priced higher than their regular counterparts, they need not always cost a bomb. Iraya's paraben-free products cost between ₹ 150 and ₹ 700. Puro has them within the range of ₹ 95 to ₹ 400 (see box). "Non-toxic preservatives like potassium sorbate, grapefruit seed extract, tea tree oils, organic acids and vitamins can also be used in place of parabens," confirms Dr Pai.

Once such products gain more visibility, the beauty industry will eventually concede to popular trends. But that's in the future. Until then, it's best to be on your guard and shop for your shampoos, moisturisers and sunscreens wisely. The thumb rule: read the labels carefully to know what's going into your skin. ■



Paraben-free

1. H2O+ Spa Sea Marine Revitalizing Shampoo, ₹ 1,450
2. L'Occitane Angelica Eye Roll-On, ₹ 1,450
3. Puro Body and Soul Lip Balm in Orange, ₹ 95
4. Dermalogica Age Smart Overnight Repair Serum, ₹ 4,995
5. Pevonia Hydrating Sunscreen SPF 30, ₹ 2,670
6. Vichy Capital Soleil Anti-shine Emulsion Dry Touch, ₹ 790

PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

Be aware of the ingredients and ingredients in your products by Helen Foster

