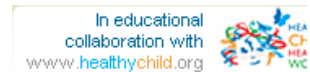




Article Link: [http://www.webmd.com/health-ehome-9/healthier-hygiene?ecd=wnl\\_day\\_031909](http://www.webmd.com/health-ehome-9/healthier-hygiene?ecd=wnl_day_031909)



This content is from an [educational collaboration](#) between WebMD Editorial and Healthy Child Healthy World.

## Healthier Hygiene

By [Matthew Hoffman, MD](#)  
WebMD Feature

Reviewed by [Michael W. Smith, MD](#)

In the 1981 film *The Incredible Shrinking Woman*, a toxic brew of ordinary household chemicals shrinks Lily Tomlin's character to microscopic size. The movie became a smash hit, capitalizing on our fear of the unpronounceable substances all around us.

Today, a growing group of environmental activists, scientists, and ordinary people is calling attention to the possible real-life risks of the products we swallow, spray, and smear on our bodies every day.

"It's not in question that many consumer products contain toxins -- they do," says Alan Greene, MD, clinical professor of pediatrics at Stanford University and author of *Raising Baby Green*. "Most are felt to be in too tiny of a quantity to pose any real risk. But sometimes, very small exposures can have large impacts."

Spurred by recent research studies, some of which contradict established opinion about what's safe, environmental advocates now have some of the most commonly used consumer products on their watch lists.

"The irony is, these products' presumed safety has led them to be produced and consumed almost indiscriminately," says Rebecca Sutton, PhD, senior scientist with the nonprofit Environmental Working Group. "We're now all exposed to multiple chemicals on a continuous basis whose long-term health effects aren't known."

Certain personal care products have become so popular, they're literally in our blood. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) now monitors the levels of ingredients from cosmetics and other products in the bloodstream of random Americans, to help guide public health discussions.

As consumers become increasing aware of potential risks, many are asking: Just what's in this stuff, anyway?

### Antibacterial Soaps and Cleaners

If it's antibacterial, it must be better at killing germs, right? That's true for healthcare-grade antibacterial soaps -- the kinds used in hospitals -- but not for the weaker concentrations in household products, according to Allison Aiello, PhD, assistant professor of epidemiology at the University of Michigan.

"Consumer antibacterial soaps don't reduce bacteria or prevent disease spread any better than ordinary hand washing," Aiello tells WebMD.

Worse, data suggest that long-term use may contribute to the emergence of antibiotic resistant "superbugs," says Aiello. The risk is a potential one, but "that possibility is there, and needs to be considered in future discussions about these products," she adds.

Other scientists are sounding an alarm over the environmental effects of millions of pounds of antibacterial chemicals in soap that get flushed and rinsed into waterways each year.

Research by Rolf Halden, PhD, associate professor at Arizona State University's Biodesign Institute, demonstrates harm to algae and other aquatic life from the antibacterial chemicals deposited in the water. In his view, the risks to the environment are only likely to increase, as massive use of these products continues.

### Antibacterial Soaps and Cleaners continued...

At last check by the CDC, 75% of adults and children's urine tested positive for triclosan, the most common antibacterial ingredient. People in higher income brackets were more likely to have triclosan in their bodies.

Although the levels were generally low, Greene asks, "If there's a potential harm to people, and proven environmental damage, without any benefits, why are we using these products?"

What you can do: Don't buy products containing triclosan or triclocarban, the most common antibacterial chemicals. Not all products will list ingredients, but you can safely avoid any product that advertises itself as "antibacterial," say experts. Wash hands -- and clean surfaces in your home -- with regular soap and water.

### Phthalates

Pronounced "THAL-ates," these chemicals are common ingredients in fragrances in consumer products. (They are also

“plasticizers” used in plumbing, shower curtains, varnishes, vinyl floors, and many other products.)

“Some of the phthalates are known to function as hormones in the human body,” says Greene. In animal studies, high doses of phthalates disrupt hormone production.

It was believed that the smaller exposures people get from each product they use were safe. But the fact that phthalates are everywhere -- even in the indoor dust we breathe -- has created concern and led to closer monitoring. The CDC finds low levels of phthalates in most of our bodies.

Some recent evidence suggests that exposure to phthalates in humans may be related to low sperm count and quality in men. Exposures in pregnant women have been associated with subtle changes in genital formation in baby boys.

What you can do: Until more evidence is in about phthalates, “it makes sense to avoid them in your personal care products when you can,” says Greene. “That’s especially true for expecting moms and children.” Unfortunately, it’s often impossible to know which of your personal care products contain phthalates, because they’re only listed as “fragrance.” Opt for fragrance-free products or choose those that use essential oils, like lavender and citrus. Check products’ ingredients in the Cosmetics Database.

### Parabens

Parabens are chemicals widely used as preservatives in cosmetics. They prevent microbes from growing, which ensures products don’t get contaminated with bacteria or fungi. Most makeup, moisturizers, hair care products, shaving products, as well as many foods and drugs, contain parabens.

Parabens act like the hormone estrogen in the body, although the effect is weak. Isolated studies have found parabens in tissue samples of breast cancer tumors, but haven’t shown that parabens cause breast tumors. FDA scientists say parabens seem safe, but more study is needed.

What you can do: Read the labels on your personal care products. Look for the words methylparaben, butylparaben, propylparaben, or other words with “paraben” included. Paraben-free products are available, if you choose to avoid this common preservative.

### Musks

It seems we’ll put just about anything on our bodies that might make us more attractive -- even the scent of a male musk deer. For centuries, natural musk aroma was prized as a supposed aphrodisiac.

Today, musk scents come from chemicals synthesized in laboratories. So-called nitro musks and polycyclic musks are widely used in perfumes and as scents in laundry products. Some synthetic musks were shown in the 1990s to have the potential to build up to toxic levels in the body, causing tissue damage.

After these studies were published, many manufacturers reduced their use of musks. However, citing ongoing research showing the safety of musks, large U.S. companies continue to commonly include these chemicals in household products like fabric softeners, laundry detergent, and perfume.

What you can do: Tonalid and Galaxolide are two trade names for polycyclic musks, but musks usually hide inside the term “fragrance” on product labels. To avoid musks, write the manufacturer for a complete ingredient listing, or opt for fragrance-free products.

To find products nearly or completely free of any potential toxin, Greene recommends the Skin Deep web site maintained by the Environmental Working Group. Its searchable database lists products it suggests are safer, in each cosmetic category. Or check the Cosmetics Database for a list of ingredients.

[View Article Sources](#) 

Reviewed on December 19, 2008

© 2009 WebMD, LLC. All rights reserved.

SHARE  
What is this?

Digg 

 del.icio.us

[More...](#)

©2005-2007 WebMD, Inc. All rights reserved.  
WebMD does not provide medical advice, diagnosis or treatment.

My Notes:

