Is your skin care costing you your life?

BY CATE GRISS

With breast cancer on the increase we women have to consider not only genetics but what we may be doing to contribute to a higher risk of the disease. Conscious effort is needed in every area to question, analyse, learn and make changes accordingly, instead of leaving our health to chance.

In a study undertaken in 2004 at Reading University, UK, a medical team headed by Dr Philippa Darbre took 20 random breast tumours and four breast parabens, the preservatives commonly used in everyday cosmetics, in every tumour.

Initial studies using thin-layer chromatography have shown that parabens can be extracted from human breast tissue. Further studies enabled identification and measurement of the individual parabens in the samples of the 20 human breast tumours using high-pressure liquid chromatography followed by tandem mass spectrometry. Methylparaben was found to be in the highest concentration level (with a mean value of 12.8 +/- 2.2 ng per g (-1) tissue) and represented 62% of the total paraben recovered in the extractions.

Parabens include methylparaben, propylparaben, isobutylparaben, butylparaben, ethylparaben and benzylparaben, and may be written as one word or two (for example, methyl paraben).

Common products in which you may find parabens are moisturisers, foundations, shampoo, conditioner, face masks, skin serums, creams, mascara, baby lotions and moisturisers, bubble bath, soaps and toothpaste, hair-styling gels, deodorants and other personal-care items.

Parabens are used in a range of food products as preservatives. Dr Darbre found that the parabens lost their ester group (a part of the molecule) when entering the body through the digestive tract, but when the parabens entered the body via the skin, they were able to remain intact and bind to oestrogen receptors, mimicking oestrogen and driving tumours. Oestrogen is a major aetiological factor in the growth and development of the majority of human breast cancers.

Further studies need to be conducted to determine the possibility of parabens accumulating in the human body and what effects that this may have using low doses over a long period of time. Food items that may contain parabens are soft drinks and fruit juices, mayonnaise, processed vegetables, jams and jellies, baked goods and marinated fish. In food products, parabens are not normally listed using the name of the paraben, but are listed by a number or a letter followed by a number.

Parabens are also known by many other names including, but not limited to: benzoic acid, p-hydroxybenzoic acid ethyl ester, p-hydroxybenzoic acid and phenylmethyl ester.

To complicate matters further, if you are an ingredient buff and like to check the labels thoroughly, you also need to be on the lookout for trade names. This simply means a company may manufacture a preservative cocktail and name it something completely different, as is the case with Germaben II which contains methylparaben, propylparaben, propylene glycol and diazolidinyl urea.

Studies conducted in Germany found that Grape Fruit Seed Extract was working well as a preservative because it was also preserved in a base of parabens. The paraben content does not need to be disclosed on the label as it is known as an 'incidental ingredient'. The study went on to say that Grape Fruit Seed Extract alone would only offer up to three months protection of a product. Manufacturers and marketers alike realise that the everyday consumer sees Grape Fruit Seed Extract as a natural preservative and will not normally delve any deeper into the product to query it. The use of this ingredient is being phased out overseas and the word is that Australia will follow.

There is another issue that must be raised and this is that if an ingredient is kept under a certain percentage, it does not have to be listed on the label.

How then do you know if what you are using is safe? Is your skincare toxic even though it may say 'natural' or 'organic' on the label? It has been noted that the use of parabens may cause dermatitis, rashes, skin irritation and other allergic reactions. Dr Darbre's findings were published in the Journal of Applied Toxicology 2004 Jan-Feb; 24(1):1-4.

My conclusion is: do what you can to learn and become an informed consumer making informed decisions. It is your health after all.

Cate Griss is founder of Kuush Natural Body Care. Kuush Products is the world's only complete water and preservative free, organic body, spa and skincare range with a minimum organic content of 95% of the total product. The remaining 5% is all natural and is normally something like herbal extracts that are currently unavailable in organic. Some Kuush Products are 100% organic and ingredients are being sourced to make the whole range 100% organic. More info, call 08 8556 8688 or go to www.kuush.com.au

[The Natural Health Society stocks in its Bookshop the Tri Nature range of household cleaning and skincare products, which are all completely free of parabens (and any other nasties). See the Tri Nature range on pages 74 and 75 – Editor.]