

PROMOTING HEALTHY
ENVIRONMENTS FOR CHILDREN

Personal Care Products



KEY POINTS

Personal care products, items used to clean or care for the body (e.g., soaps, cosmetics, sunscreen), may contain chemicals that can potentially impact health. Safer options are available for children and families. Pediatricians can counsel parents and caregivers about potential risks of personal care products.

CLINICAL GUIDANCE

Hygiene products, cosmetics, and sunscreens contain chemicals that children may be exposed to topically and, occasionally, through unintentional inhalation or ingestion. Even for products with FDA or CPSC approval, families should select products carefully, as common chemicals found in these products may impact health. Some examples include phthalates, parabens, and antimicrobial agents. Some imported products may be contaminated with heavy metals.

Prevention is key!

- **Safe Storage:** Personal care products should be kept out of reach of young children.
- **Safer Cleaning:** Advise families to use proper handwashing procedures with plain soap and water, rather than using antibacterial soap.
- Use fluoridated toothpaste without triclosan or other antibacterial compounds. Toothpaste should be used in small quantities, followed by rinsing and spitting. Adult supervision when children brush is recommended until at least age 6.
- **Shop smart:** Check labels and choose products that do not contain phthalates, parabens, triclosan, or synthetic fragrances. If unsure, choose “fragrance-free” products or those without strong scents.
- Plant-based oils such as cocoa butter and coconut oil can be safe alternatives to products that contain multiple ingredients.
- **Safer Beauty:** Minimize use of cosmetic products in children. Chemical hair straighteners, home permanent kits, and alcohol-based hair sprays should be avoided for children. Some cosmetics and eyeliner manufactured in foreign countries may have lead or other heavy metals, and should be avoided.
- Young children with hand-to-mouth behaviors should not use nail polish. Water-based nail polishes may be safer choices for children.
- **Sun Protection:** It's great to be outside and it's important to do so safely to avoid sunburning. Wear protective clothing, including long sleeves and pants, sunhats, and sunglasses; and seek shade when possible. Children should use a broad-spectrum sunscreen with an SPF of 15 to 30 on exposed areas of skin. Mineral-based sunscreen (e.g., zinc oxide) is preferable to chemical-based sunscreen (e.g., oxybenzone). To avoid inhalation, suggest the use of lotions, or, if using a spray, spray onto hands and then apply to child.
- It is important to be mindful of cultural practices that may confer safety risks.

Clinical effects:

- Several compounds in personal care products, including phthalates and parabens, are known to interfere with the endocrine system. Reducing exposures in children and pregnant persons is particularly important.
- Chemicals used in some nail primers are corrosive and can cause significant skin and nail bed irritation, as well as chemical burns from unintentional ingestion or inhalation.
- Hair straightener and home permanent chemicals can irritate the skin and mucosa, trigger allergic reactions, and their use can lead to chemical inhalation.
- Exposure to lead and other heavy metals confers neurodevelopmental toxicity, and there is no known safe level of exposure to these metals.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The following resources offer additional information regarding personal care products:

- [*Pediatric Environmental Health, 4th Edition*](#) – AAP Policy Manual
- [Environmental Working Group Skin Deep Database](#)
- [Cosmetic Ingredient Review](#)
- [Chemical Inspection and Regulation Service](#)