

Are Toy Cosmetics Making Children Sick?

Columbia researchers discover that American kids use potentially toxic makeup with surprising frequency.

By

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Face paint, body glitter, lip gloss, and nail polish. The products are marketed to children in brightly colored packages adorned with images of princesses, unicorns, and cartoon characters. They must be safe, right?

In fact, cosmetics for kids, like those for adults, are subject to little regulatory oversight and have been found to contain toxic chemicals including lead, cadmium, asbestos, phthalates, and formaldehyde. Experts say that even products advertised as “nontoxic,” “organic,” or “natural” must be regarded with caution, since such terms are not defined by the US Food and Drug Administration for makeup and therefore have no legal meaning. Still, debate has raged about whether strict new safety standards for kids’ cosmetics are needed, given uncertainty about their levels of exposure.

Columbia researchers have now turned up the heat on this issue, revealing that children in the United States use cosmetics more frequently and for longer periods of time than was previously known. Led by epidemiologist [Julie B. Herbstman](#), the director of the [Columbia Center for Children’s Environmental Health](#), the researchers surveyed hundreds of American families about their children’s play habits, finding that the vast majority of polled kids under the age of twelve had at some point used makeup that may contain harmful chemicals and carcinogens. Furthermore, they found that 54 percent of children in the study used play cosmetics on a monthly basis; 10 percent used the products daily, often for hours at a time; and more than one-third of the children had unintentionally ingested makeup in the previous year.

The [study](#), which appears in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, comes as several states, including New York and Washington, are considering tightening their consumer regulations around toys, makeup, and personal-care products. But the authors say that stricter oversight of the cosmetics industry is needed at the federal level, especially to ensure the safety of products intended for kids.

“Children’s small body size, rapid growth rate, developing organs, and immature immune systems make them particularly vulnerable to the effects of environmental chemicals,” Herbstman says. “Our findings suggest that federal regulators should consider children as a special class of individuals who are using personal-care products and who need protection.”

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