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SCANDALS AND SECRETS OF THE BEAUTY BIZ

Believe it or not, beauty companies stretch the truth once in a while to entice you to buy products. We'll tell you all about their "dirty secrets" so you can tell when they're promising more than their products can deliver and when you're paying more than you probably should. We'll even explain the true meaning of confusing buzzwords that you hear every day, like *natural* and *organic*.

THE THREE BIGGEST FIBS THAT COSMETICS COMPANIES TELL

Kris's question: *My mother-in-law is a "beauty consultant" for a company called BeautiControl and they seem to have a pretty extensive line of skin care products. Do you know anything about the quality of this line and/or can you recommend any BeautiControl products?*

Based on what we've seen, BeautiControl products seem to be of reasonable quality. They're also very pricey, but if you can afford them, that's your decision.

What bugs us, and the reason that we would not recommend them, is the way the company hypes its products. We understand the need for creative marketing, but when a company makes statements that border on being false, that really disturbs us. We just hate being misled and we *really* hate it under the guise of science. There are at least three tip-offs when a company is stretching the truth about its products. Here are some examples using BeautiControl.

1. CLAIMS OF EXCLUSIVITY

What's misleading?

BeautiControl says that "only" its products can give you a certain benefit.

What's the truth?

The truth is, unless the company has a patent or a documented trade secret, BeautiControl is using the same technology as everyone else in the industry.

What's the example?

BeautiControl says, "Only BeautiControl offers comprehensive, customized skin care that addresses what your skin needs when it needs it." Based on its product catalog, the company appears to have typical cleansers, toners, lotions and the like that are offered by many, many other companies. So why does the literature say that "only" BeautiControl offers this kind of treatment?

2. IMPLYING SUPERIOR PERFORMANCE WITHOUT SUBSTANTIATION

What's misleading?

BeautiControl marketers tell you their products work better than anyone else's.

What's the truth?

If they make claims like that, they'd better have some kind of proof.

What's the example?

BeautiControl says, "Far beyond traditional dry, combination and oily skin care, BeautiControl takes an innovative, personal approach to provide total skin wellness through..." Blah, blah, blah. Again, with conventional products there is no way they can convince us that their products are "far beyond traditional" ones. Yes, they may be applying a different marketing spin, but there is no technology muscle behind their mouth.

3. "MAGIC" INGREDIENT CLAIMS

What's misleading?

They say that some sexy-sounding ingredient makes the product work.

What's the truth?

In reality, most of the time it's the formula as a whole and not any single ingredient that makes the product work.

What's the example?

BeautiControl says one of its products is "formulated with the rejuvenating minerals of the Dead Sea." Minerals don't rejuvenate skin; moisturizing agents do.

OK, technically BeautiControl isn't "lying" to us, but their public relations department is certainly overstating the uniqueness of their line. And as scientists, that kind of hype turns us off.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Most beauty companies in the United States produce high-quality products that will provide basic benefits like cleansing, moisturizing and otherwise beautifying. Unfortunately, the claims they make are often exaggerations of what you'll really experience.

WHAT DOES ORGANIC REALLY MEAN?

Stacey says: *I'm confused by all the companies that sell organic and natural products. What makes a product organic?*

For chemists like the Beauty Brains, the meaning of *organic* is clear. It is any chemical compound that contains carbon. In fact, to get a college chemistry degree, you take a year of organic chemistry, in which you memorize endless chemical reac-

tions between hydrocarbons, oxygen, nitrogen and more. Many a chemist wannabe switched to a marketing major after flunking organic chemistry.

WHAT DOES ORGANIC MEAN IN TERMS OF COSMETICS?

Organic doesn't mean quite the same thing in the cosmetics industry as it does in the food industry. To consumers it can mean "natural," "green," "chemical-free" or "found at Whole Foods." But there is no cosmetics industry-standard meaning for terms like *organic* or *natural*. Unlike the farming industry, these terms are not regulated for cosmetics. Companies can pretty much claim that anything is natural or organic.

For example, imagine a body wash formula. It contains all kinds of synthetic surfactants, fragrances, preservatives and colors. But it also contains 85-90 percent water. A company might simply claim "90 percent organic" or "90 percent natural" and be telling the truth. Certainly, this isn't in the spirit of what people believe *organic* to mean, but it is within the law.

The people at Burt's Bees are outraged by the tricks some companies are playing on the public. They are campaigning to get tighter regulations on cosmetics that use terms such as *natural* or *organic*. Stay tuned to see if they will make a difference.

ARE ORGANIC PRODUCTS BETTER?

Incidentally, natural or organic cosmetic products don't provide any added benefit for consumers. In fact companies that strive to make *organic* or *natural* products often end up with finished products that are functionally inferior to more mainstream products. This is the real trade-off when it comes to natural or organic products. That and a hugely higher cost for an inferior product.

Remember, cosmetics are not food. No one has ever proven there is a benefit to "organically" derived cosmetics.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Organic is a term used by chemists to describe carbon-containing molecules. And it's used by cosmetic marketers to trick you into buying cosmetics that are often functionally inferior.

5 HOME BEAUTY GADGETS THAT REALLY WORK

While there are a lot of products out there making false claims about what they can do, there are several new beauty gadgets on the market that do work. According to Dr. Thomas Rohrer, MD, clinical associate professor of dermatology at Boston University Medical Center, "We are getting to the point where, for certain things, patients may be able to treat themselves safely and fairly effectively at home."

However, Dr. Rohrer also points out that these treatments are still less effective than the devices used by physicians: "They're not going to be nearly as powerful" but "they may be effective enough... to improve some conditions." Here are five beauty gadgets that Dr. Rohrer says really work:

1. Hair removal: *The Epila SI-808 Laser and the Spa Touch from Radiancy*
According to Dr. Rohrer, Spa Touch showed moderate efficacy with patients reporting an average 66% reduction in unwanted hair counts. At nine months' follow-up, patients noted about a one-third reduction. Furthermore, there were minimal side effects.

2. Hair growth: *HairMax LaserComb from Lexington International LLC*
This device is one of only three treatments that are FDA-approved for hair growth. Dr. Rohrer says that "in a twenty-six-week, multicenter, placebo-controlled study with this device, 93% of subjects noticed an increase in hair count."

3. Acne devices: *Zeno MD from Tyrell and ClearTouch Lite from Radiancy*
Both devices thermally treat acne lesions and, according to Dr. Rohrer, Zeno achieved a 90% reduction in lesion counts in one to two days.

4. Facial photorejuvenation: *NuLase from NuLase International LLC and ClearTouch Lite from Radiancy*
Light-emitting diode devices are safe, relatively pain-free and can provide "subtle but real changes in the skin," says Dr. Rohrer.

5. Facial toning: *Facial toning device from Radiancy*
Dr. Rohrer claims the Radiancy device uses LHE (light and heat energy) technology and is capable of reducing age spots and wrinkles. However, the study he cited has not yet been published so we're more skeptical of this one.

public, pancake makeup became one of the biggest-selling products in the history of the cosmetics industry.

HOW SALON BRANDS GET AWAY WITH LYING TO YOU

Sally the salon operator writes: *I just noticed that the first ingredient listed in the Pureology shampoos and conditioners is now water. It's crazy how L'Oreal buys the brand and the first thing they do is "water down" the product (but not the price). My clients loved that there was no water in the products because they are so concentrated. What's the story?*

The old Pureology shampoos and conditioners are good, although expensive, products. But just because the first ingredient is a botanical blend instead of water doesn't mean the products are more concentrated. And it certainly doesn't mean the products don't contain any water!

SMALL COMPANIES CAN BE SNEAKY

What it really means is that Pureology was a small, independent salon company, and they chose not to follow the cosmetics labeling laws strictly. Many small companies use this trick of listing extracts first, thus making it look like they don't have any water. Don't fall for it! It's one of the oldest tricks in this industry and it's misleading and unfair. The formula is still mostly water!

Unfortunately, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and other agencies that fight this kind of consumer fraud are too busy with more serious issues and don't have time to chase after small companies that are tricking consumers with these kinds of labeling shenanigans.

BIGGER COMPANIES FOLLOW THE LAW

Since L'Oreal is a much bigger company, it tends to play by the rules that all the big companies are held to. In the end, this is better for the consumer because you're getting more truth. Instead of being upset with L'Oreal, you should be thankful that it's labeling the products honestly.

And by the way, since L'Oreal has a much larger research staff than Pureology, any formula changes it makes are probably for the better!

ARE MORE EXPENSIVE PRODUCTS WORTH THE PRICE?

Grace wants to know: *Is it the quality really worth the increased price to pay for nondrugstore brands of cosmetics, skin care and hair care products?*

This is one of the most common questions asked of the Beauty Brains. It warms our hearts because within the question is a kernel of skepticism that every beauty product consumer should harbor. It's also a thing that cosmetics marketers and manufacturers don't want you to have. It makes their jobs that much tougher!

To answer your question, we first have to make sure we're both on the same page. We assume that you are wondering whether the more expensive nondrugstore brands (like those found in salons, department stores and spas) perform better, are better for you or are otherwise superior to drugstore products.

MORE EXPENSIVE PRODUCTS DO NOT WORK BETTER

From a performance standpoint, no, there is no reason to pay for higher-priced products. There have been numerous studies that demonstrate that expensive beauty products do not perform better than drugstore brands. In 2006, *Consumer Reports* reviewed face creams and found no correlation between how much they cost and how well they worked. Similar results were found by the BBC, which broadcast a documentary about anti-aging creams in 2007, and by a 2008 French consumer watchdog group study. The conclusion of all the most thorough work so far is simple:

More expensive does not equal better working.

And this makes sense if you consider the following.

THE INGREDIENTS AREN'T DIFFERENT

In the United States, cosmetics and personal care products are all made from ingredients listed in the INCI (*International Nomenclature of Cosmetic Ingredients Dictionary*). For the most part, any company can create formulas that work nearly as well as any other company. The cetearyl alcohol found in the expensive La Prairie skin products is no different than the cetearyl alcohol found in Olay.

THE SAME COMPANY MAKES DIFFERENT-PRICED PRODUCTS

Another reason to avoid paying for higher-priced products is because they are often made by companies that offer similar products for a much lower price. In the

cosmetics industry, big corporations like Procter & Gamble and Unilever sell numerous brands at different price points. For example, P&G makes hair care products under the brand Pantene, but they also make Herbal Essences and Head & Shoulders. These products frequently use the same technologies but have much different costs. The cost differences are not related to how well the formula performs, but rather to the marketing and advertising.

MASS MARKET PRODUCTS ARE OFTEN BETTER TESTED

The final reason that it is not worth paying for more expensive brands is that they are often made by smaller companies that do not have large research and development staffs. They don't put nearly as much money into developing and testing the best possible products. In fact, the product development work is often done by a contract manufacturer and not by the cosmetics company itself. Products from big companies that sell in drugstores are much more thoroughly tested and perform better overall.

WHEN YOU SHOULD PAY MORE

So, if you are concerned about performance, then you should not buy the highest-priced cosmetics and personal care products. However, beauty products are not just about performance. Most people like the experience that goes along with using a beauty product. If this is your concern, then it may be worth it to you to spend more for your products. Factors like fragrance, packaging and brand name can all influence how happy you are with your purchase. If you can't feel good about yourself by having a Suave shampoo bottle in your shower, spending the extra money for Paul Mitchell might be worth it to you. Just don't expect it to work better...it probably won't.

THE BOTTOM LINE

As we've said many times, if you like a product and you can afford it, buy it. But if you're buying a product because of hype you hear from the company that sells it, you're being fooled. Save your money and buy something less expensive!

WHY DOES THE BEAUTY INDUSTRY GET AWAY WITH MAKING BOGUS CLAIMS?

Maryellen wonders: Why is the beauty industry allowed to claim what they claim, as most of it is really bogus? How did this develop over time?

We've written extensively about how cosmetics companies trick you but, to be fair, very little of what they specifically claim is bogus. There are relatively few occasions when companies tell out-and-out lies. When they do, they get fined or closed down by the government. So, where does the impression come from that the beauty industry marketers lie, even when they don't? Simple—marketing people are creative wordsmiths who know how to mislead you without actually lying.

THEY DON'T EXACTLY LIE

If you look closely at advertisements, you'll find the things they claim are not lies.

For example, look at the Boots product claims in its No7 Protect & Perfect Beauty Serum.

- (1) *Anti-Aging is getting Intense...No7 Protect & Perfect Intense Beauty Serum has been tested like no other cosmetic anti-aging product in an independent 12-month trial.*
- (2) *The findings clearly show that it has genuine, long-term anti-aging benefits.*
- (3) *70% of the volunteers using the product showed a marked improvement in the appearance of photoaged skin after 12 months of use.*
- (4) *This proven anti-aging formula contains retinyl palmitate, antioxidants, firming peptides and alfalfa extract to reduce the appearance of deep lines and wrinkles by up to 50% in just 4 weeks, the longer you use it the better it works.*

Claim (1) is very likely true. Of course, every product is tested like no other!

It's difficult to say whether claim (2) is bogus because company spokespeople do not define "anti-aging benefits" nor how long "long term" is. Keeping things vague allows them to build up expectations in your mind without actually lying.

Claim (3) is likely true. But notice they do not explain what they mean by "marked improvement." Was this what the people who used the product thought, or was it the people running the test or someone else? It matters.

Claim (4) is absolutely true, since the product does contain all those things. What is not clear is what they mean by "proven anti-aging formula." Also, they say the product contains these things to "reduce the appearance of wrinkles"

not to actually “reduce wrinkles.” The word *appearance* is critical to keeping the statement true.

Perhaps all these claims together give you the impression that the product should work better than it does, but there are no specific lies.

In the U.S., television stations are held accountable for everything they broadcast and it is illegal for them to air false advertising. They can be fined or eventually shut down by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). So the TV people strictly require that statements made in every commercial be backed up by some kind of evidence.

SOMETIMES THEY DO GET IN TROUBLE

While beauty companies do have great copywriters, sometimes they get in trouble. Recently, L’Oreal was cited for using an actress with false eyelashes to promote mascara. P&G was forced to withdraw an ad for Olay because the ad’s creators airbrushed the image of the model to make her look better.

STORIES SELL PRODUCTS BETTER THAN PERFORMANCE

Most beauty products work about the same. Shampoos may smell different or feel a little different, but the vast majority of people would not notice differences if they tested these products on a blinded basis. For this reason, beauty companies have had to come up with better and better stories to make themselves stand out. When you can’t stand out based on performance, you can always tell a better story.

PEOPLE WANT TO BE DECEIVED

The thing is that people seem to want to be deceived. They want to believe that hair can be restored or that wrinkles can be made to vanish. They want to believe that they are not wasting money when they spend \$300 on a face cream. The cosmetics industry is just giving people what they want. Unfortunately, most of the significant problems related to beauty have not been adequately solved by cosmetics scientists. We continue to look for better solutions, but they are slow to develop.

THE BOTTOM LINE

While it is frustrating, and it might seem as if the cosmetics industry does nothing but lie, there are few instances of outright lying going on. For the most part, beauty companies tell the truth, but they do it in such a way that you are left with the impression that their products work better than they actually do. It is up to consumers to pay attention to what they read and think about claims they hear. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

WHAT DOES HYPOALLERGENIC MEAN?

Kathy’s query: I was wondering what the most hypoallergenic makeup out there is. I have heard that all makeup is hypoallergenic, but I can’t believe this is true. There are many brands that I cannot even look at, let alone use, without breaking out.

There is no universal standard for what constitutes hypoallergenic. Since each company is free to create its own guidelines, there’s no way to tell which brand is the “most” hypoallergenic.

HYPE-O-ALLERGENIC

According to the FDA,

hypoallergenic cosmetics are products that manufacturers claim produce fewer allergic reactions than other cosmetic products. Consumers with hypersensitive skin, and even those with “normal” skin, may be led to believe that these products will be gentler to their skin than nonhypoallergenic cosmetics.

There are no federal standards or guidelines that govern the use of the term *hypoallergenic*. The term means whatever a particular company wants it to mean. Manufacturers of cosmetics labeled as *hypoallergenic* are not required to submit substantiation of their hypoallergenicity claims to the FDA.

Furthermore, the FDA cautions that the word *hypoallergenic* has advertising value but “Dermatologists say it has very little meaning.”

THE BOTTOM LINE

Sadly, you can’t necessarily tell if a product will be good for your skin by whether or not it claims to be hypoallergenic. Instead, look for brands that have a good reputation and that avoid ingredients like fragrance that are known irritants. And once you find a product that works for you, stick with it.

ARE YOUR COSMETICS POISONING YOU?

Tracy is troubled: *I saw this newspaper headline that says "women absorb up to five pounds of damaging chemicals a year from their beauty products. I'm amazed, astonished and perplexed. Can it be true?"*

We figured the article you mentioned was just a typical "scare" piece designed to spook us into fearing chemicals, but the article actually provides a reference to its headline and quotes from a biochemist. So we were intrigued. Are we really absorbing pounds of chemicals through our skin? We had to see the proof. The actual quote from the article is "The average woman absorbs 4 lbs, 6 oz of chemicals from toiletries and makeup every year, the industry magazine *In-Cosmetics* recently reported."

NEWSWORTHY SOURCES

Here's where it gets interesting. First of all, *In-Cosmetics* is not a peer-reviewed scientific journal; it's a magazine published in conjunction with an annual trade show where companies that sell ingredients in cosmetics go to show off their newest products. Secondly, the quote appeared in an article titled "Trends in natural and organic cosmetics and toiletries."

It turns out that the notion that women absorb five pounds of chemicals a year from cosmetics comes from a scientist who runs a natural-products company called Spiezia Organics. According to Dr. Mariano Spiezia and his wife, Loredana, "Everything we need to be fulfilled and healthy is provided by nature. Today's research suggests that the human body will absorb most of what is applied to the skin, meaning that up to 2 kg (5 pounds) of chemicals a year from toiletries and skincare preparations."

There is no other reference provided. No studies are cited. Dr. Spiezia makes this assertion without making it clear what data he is basing it on. Without a clear foundation, this is junk science. The reporter just quotes it as fact. It is not fact. It is nonsense. It is the kind of junk science that some natural or organic companies try to dupe you into believing so you won't feel bad about spending your hard-earned money on their overpriced products.

DO YOU ABSORB FIVE POUNDS OF COSMETICS CHEMICALS THROUGH YOUR SKIN EACH YEAR?

Based on our knowledge of the barrier properties of skin, this claim seems ridiculous. It suggests that skin is a sponge that absorbs any chemical it's exposed to. In fact, skin is just the opposite. It is actually a barrier that prevents chemicals from getting inside your body.

It's not a perfect barrier because some compounds do pass through the skin, like some sunscreens (e.g., benzophenone-3) and drugs like nicotine. So scientists are concerned about chemicals on the skin. But safety studies are conducted on chemicals all the time and the vast majority don't behave that way.

For the most part, the raw materials in cosmetics do not penetrate the skin so deeply that they are absorbed into the bloodstream. They are typically absorbed into only the top layer of skin (the stratum corneum) and are naturally removed over time through exfoliation.

THE BOTTOM LINE

No, your cosmetics are not poisoning you. Chemicals can be absorbed through your skin, but that is true of only a small number of them and these have not been shown to cause problems. You certainly don't absorb five pounds of chemicals through your skin each year. The important thing to remember when you hear claims like this in the media is to check the source. Occasionally, it's backed up by science, but usually it is propaganda disseminated by a biased source. Proof is found in scientific studies, not in the opinions of natural-product selling "experts."

SHOULD YOU WORRY ABOUT URINE IN YOUR MAKEUP?

Meagan muses: *I've got a question about diazolidinyl urea. I see it on labels for lotions and cleansers all the time. Doesn't urea come from urine? That seems disgusting! What's the story?*

Let's start by explaining that "diazolidinyl urea" is a preservative and it's used in many cosmetics to keep microscopic bugs from spoiling the products you bought with your hard-earned money. It so happens that urea is one of the compounds used to make this ingredient. In addition, urea is also used in some creams and lotions as a moisturizer. So urea is used in cosmetics, but does urea really come from urine? Well, urine does contain urea. That's because urea excretion is just one of the ways your body gets rid of the excess nitrogen waste material that it generates. Different animals process this waste in different ways: Aquatic organisms excrete it in the form of ammonia. Reptiles and birds excrete it in the form of uric acid. And we humans excrete it in the form of urea.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT PREGNANCY AND COSMETICS

Jan speaks frankly: I've heard that you should avoid putting certain ingredients on your skin when you're pregnant. Are salicylic acid, self-tanners and sunscreens safe to use when you're expecting? Are there any other ingredients or skin care products pregnant women should avoid?

Experts agree that you should limit unnecessary drug exposure when you're pregnant. Here's what we found out from two expert sources: the American Pregnancy Association and the American Academy of Dermatologists.

FIVE FACTS ABOUT PREGNANCY AND SKIN CARE INGREDIENTS

1 Retin-A (Isotretinoin) is a prescription acne medication that can cause cardiac problems in a fetus.

2 Minoxidil (aka Rogaine), the over-the-counter hair restoration drug, is also known to contribute to birth defects.

3 Fluconazole is a topical antifungal drug that can also be teratogenic (meaning, it causes birth defects).

4 Sunscreens and sunless tanners appear to be fine. There have been no reports of babies born with problems related to the mother's use of sunscreens. In fact, since UV radiation may cause folic acid deficiency, which can lead to neural tube defects like spina bifida, sunscreens could actually help!

5 Salicylic acid facial products are apparently low risk as well. But muscle creams containing a related compound (methyl salicylate) can be dangerous if overused, even if you're not pregnant.

THE BOTTOM LINE

You should avoid certain medications and products when you're pregnant, and be sure to check with your doctor to make sure you're doing everything right for you and your baby's health.

FIVE WAYS BEAUTY PRODUCTS CAN GO BAD

Cayley is quizzical: Do beauty products have expiration dates hidden on the package? Whenever I see a great deal for an expensive beauty product on eBay or at a discount store like Marshalls, I wonder if the product has expired and is no longer as effective.

There's no way to tell if a cosmetic has expired just by looking at the package, but we can tell you what to look for when products go bad.

1 Change in odor

Fragrances are made of dozens of different ingredients that can react with the rest of the product. It's not surprising, then, that the fragrance is often the first thing to go bad. A little fragrance fading is totally normal, but if you detect a sour or rancid odor, it may be a sign that something is seriously wrong.

2 Color shifting

The color of the product is very sensitive to light, so it's not unusual for cosmetics in clear packaging to experience a shift in shade. Slight color changes don't necessarily mean there's anything functionally wrong with the product, but you certainly don't want your red lipstick to become too orangey.

3 Change in texture

Changes in the consistency of a product may be subtle but significant. For example, if your skin lotion looks exceptionally thick or thin, or if it appears too grainy, this may be an early indicator of emulsion instability. This means the oil- and water-soluble chemicals are separating. Not good!

4 Microbial contamination

If you see any black spots or fuzzy growth in your product, it could be contaminated with bacteria or fungus. Get rid of it immediately or you may be at risk for infection! And by the way, you should never dilute a product with water just so you can get the last little bit out of the bottle. Adding water can dilute the preservative system, which can allow potentially dangerous bugs to grow.

5 Physical separation

If the product has separated into two layers, it has gone bad. You can't always fix it by just remixing it. This is particularly true of cosmetics that have active ingredients, like sunscreens and dandruff shampoos. Once the active drug ingredient has separated from the rest of the formula, it may not work properly anymore.

THREE REASONS WHY IT'S OK TO HAVE TOXINS IN COSMETICS

Shara wants to learn: I read on a medical website that ammonium hydroxide is a toxin and is found in many industrial products and cleaners such as flooring stripers, brick cleaners and cements. I've noticed it in several skin care products (like NeoStrata AHA gel) and I'm worried. Worst of all, they warn you not to get it on your skin or in your eyes. Why is this toxic chemical in cosmetics?

Consumers should be asking questions like this to find out if their cosmetics are safe. But, believe it or not, a lot of cosmetics (and food products!) contain ingredients that can be harmful at high concentrations. It's actually perfectly safe to use ingredients like these as long as they're formulated properly. Here are three reasons why it's OK to have a toxic chemical in cosmetics.

1 It's present at low levels.

The ingredient can be added to the formula at such a low level that it has no negative effect whatsoever. Some preservatives are irritating when applied directly to the skin. But when used at very low levels in a product, they are much more easily tolerated by most people.

2 It's used up in a reaction.

The ingredient can be used up or chemically reacted so it's not actually present in the finished product in a harmful form. Ammonium hydroxide is a good example of this type: It reacts with acidic materials in the formula and is neutralized to form a safe salt.

3 It's not abused.

The ingredient can be dangerous if abused, but is safe if used properly. For example, a hair relaxer is very dangerous if you swallow it or get it in your eyes. But when you use this toxic product properly, there's usually no problem. (Although some people do find relaxers irritating.)

THE BOTTOM LINE

We're not saying that *all* toxic ingredients should be treated as safe; we're just saying that you shouldn't overreact to something you read on a website when the information is taken out of context. Ammonium hydroxide is not something you have to worry about in your skin lotion.

ARE NATURAL PRODUCTS BETTER THAN PROCESSED?

Shara wants to know: I've heard about parasites in Baby's Bliss Gripe Water. What's the story?

The FDA has reported that the parasite cryptosporidium has, indeed, been found in this product. People who have given Mom Enterprises' Baby's Bliss Gripe Water to their infants now have the added benefit of knowing they may have given them a parasite, too. If you are one of those parents who have a bottle with code 26952V and an expiration date of October 2008, throw away or return the product immediately.

HERBAL SUPPLEMENT OUTRAGE

Herbal supplement companies are not regulated, and the FDA does not have enough resources to test every supplement product put on the market, so you have no way of knowing whether the product is safe or not. Unlike food manufacturers, there is no law that requires independent testing of the products made and sold by herbal supplement manufacturers. These supplements can have real health effects and it's only through sheer luck that problems are discovered.

THE NONSENSE OF NATURAL PRODUCTS

Mom Enterprises also sells a line of personal care products. We hope that the company doesn't rely on the "naturalness" of its raw materials and treats them to remove disease-causing parasites, bacteria and viruses. These are the kinds of things that preservatives are designed to kill. Yes, preservatives protect us from the evil things found in natural products.

Mom Enterprises' Baby's Bliss makes a diaper cream the company claims to be "100% natural." Their list of ingredients includes the following:

caprylic/capric triglyceride, cetyl alcohol, zinc oxide, cetearyl olivate (and) sorbitan olivate, stearic acid, dimethicone, glycine, fragrance.

You can't find dimethicone in nature. It's derived from sand, but you have to go through a lot of chemical processing to make it. This product isn't 100 percent natural. It's processed, and that's a good thing. Processed products are safer products!