



the risks not taken

dyeing to live

Loren Minsky explores the risks involved in hair colourants.

For years I regarded my mom as unnecessarily neurotic in her fear and avoidance of many chemicals in cosmetics. I opted to go with the philosophy that life was too short to focus on such minutiae and instead avoided checking the ingredients. At the time I was an advertiser's dream and loved creaming, exfoliating, moisturizing, lightening, and brightening - I was happier to be uninformed. I enjoyed believing that the latest hair product was the answer to my untamed, mane-like hair, no matter the cost to my health, hair or budget. It is interesting how life turns out. Several trying personal experiences pointed me in a more natural and gentle direction. This, combined with a job in the hair dye industry, was enough to show me that what I had once viewed as my mom's 'neurotic' avoidance was a more appropriate and mindful reaction to the contents of many conventional products.

When we are ready to see past the veil of product marketing and look at household products for what they are, namely their ingredients, we are faced with a truth. Shower gels, despite their appealing colours, inclusion of a few herbs and soothing scent, often contain chemicals traditionally used for industrial purposes. This also applies to perfume, make-up, toothpaste, and of course, hair dyes, particularly permanent hair dyes. I'm not saying that nowadays I choose to use only essential oils and pure plant and vegetable-based products. I admire the spirit of balance, and prefer delicately balancing the risks and rewards of everything. But where possible, it just makes sense to consider making educated, conscious decisions, being aware of potential dangers and opting for the most natural accessible alternatives available. Looking at the latest scientific

research on the danger of permanent hair dyes, one finds conflicting opinions. In an article published in May 2005 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, the conclusion read, "We did not find strong evidence of a marked increase in the risk of cancer among personal hair dye users. Some aspects related to hematopoietic cancer and other cancers that have shown evidence of increased risk in one or two studies should be investigated further". This contrasts with research published in the *International Journal of Cancer* in 2001: "After adjustment for cigarette smoking, a major risk factor for bladder cancer, women who used permanent hair dyes at least once a month experienced a 2.1 fold risk of bladder cancer relative to non-users". According to CANSA, white South African women have some of the highest incident rates of bladder cancer of any ethnic group in the world. The EU's Scientific Committee on Consumer Products has commenced its own investigation into the matter, which is currently ongoing. What all agree on is that common chemical ingredients used to facilitate the permanent colouring process such as ammonia, resorcinol, paraben and PPD (p-Phenylenediamine) are allergens - substances which can cause an allergic reaction when in contact with the body - although sensitivities will range substantially from person to person.

Ammonia, which is highly alkaline, is used in permanent hair dyes. Ammonia opens up the hair cuticles in order to deposit the colour pigments, the problem being that the hair cuticles are opened to such an extent that it is impossible to fully close them afterwards. The addition of silicones to alkaline dyes serve to coat the outside of the hair shaft, trapping the colour pigments and making the hair feel soft, so you think the product has 'conditioned' your hair. Despite the initial feeling of softness produced by silicone, subsequent shampooing quickly removes this and leaves the cuticle partially open which allows the pigment to escape. This results in colour fading rapidly and your hair feeling increasingly dryer and more damaged. More disconcerting is that ammonia is the same ingredient used in many household cleaning products and the reason why hair dye smells so strong. This is an important fact when you take into consideration that more than 60% of women and up to 10% of men, depending on the country, regularly dye their hair. For many of these hair dyes, potential dangers are often overlooked with the appeal of covering grey hair, looking young and hair looking beautiful. It is understandable since looking one's best is a result of looking after yourself and ultimately impacts on self-esteem. I confess that being more informed about the potential dangers of hair dyes has not curbed my desire to look good and experiment with colour. But these days I prefer to go with the more natural alternatives.

A completely natural well-known semi-permanent preference is Henna powder, made from the leaves of a desert shrub called Lawsonia. Henna attaches itself to the hair shaft and generally fades out after four to six weeks. Although some women love the body and thickness it gives to hair, others complain about the limited colour options, claiming that it does not cover grey and can leave the hair feeling dry. Also, Henna creates a solid coating around the hair shaft, preventing other colour treatments and processes, such as perms, from taking. When it comes to true permanent colour that does everything that we expect from top conventional brands, like covering grey, there is nothing on the world market that is completely natural. The question to ask is what is the best and most natural permanent option?

As in most things, looking for more natural alternatives strikes the ideal risk-reward balance - one of high reward and least risk. In modern life, it is about where you place your risks, and it is vital to be aware of any potential risks with any life decisions we make. Some foods may have high sugar levels with immune affecting implications. It is not to say that we necessarily cut them out entirely; it may be possible to reduce the risk by eating a healthy and balanced diet and indulge in them only occasionally. This also applies to cosmetic products and hair colouring. Read the labels and be aware of your own possible product sensitivities. Perform patch tests for any product, discuss risks with your doctor and go for products with the least amount of chemicals. The good news is that from time to time we can enjoy the same results with less risk. r

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