



The facts about... allergy

The Cosmetic, Toiletry & Perfumery Association (CTPA) held its second Media Panel event in October 2009 in London. This series of knowledge-sharing sessions with health and beauty journalists is designed to provide key insights into topical issues and access to leading experts.

This factsheet features extracts from a presentation given by Dr Jennifer Jones, a consultant dermatologist at the Royal Free Hospital in London and consultant at St John and Elizabeth Hospital. Jennifer is also a British Skin Foundation spokesperson (www.britishskinfoundation.org.uk). Key facts from CTPA's in-house scientists – Dr Chris Flower, a Chartered Biologist with MSc and PhD degrees in toxicology, and Dr Emma Meredith, a pharmacist by profession, added a cosmetic perspective.

Not all reactions are allergic

Awareness about skin 'sensitivity' has increased, but not all reactions are actually allergic. The term 'allergy' is often misused to describe an irritation: 80% of reactions are in fact irritations not allergies. Irritant reactions usually show very soon after using a product and may involve skin redness and itching, but rapidly clear up if you stop using the product.



Allergic reactions cannot occur on first exposure

Allergic reactions are excessive reactions by our bodies to substances in our environment that are harmless to the majority. There are two relevant types of reaction to consider.

Type I occurs very quickly after exposure and is generally associated with food. At their most severe they can be life threatening, but rarely happen from contact exposure.

Type IV reactions show more slowly after exposure and can take 24 to 72 hours to appear. They are generally localised to the site of contact and are not life threatening. Reactions to cosmetics tend to fall into this category.

You cannot suffer from an allergic reaction after a single exposure. That first exposure can prime the body to over-react at some future time when you come into contact with the same substance again. A person who is allergic to a substance is likely to be sensitised to it for the rest of their life and should avoid exposure even if in another product type or brand.

Consult an expert

It can be very difficult to tell whether someone is allergic, intolerant or suffering from greater sensitivity to a substance for a variety of reasons. Keeping a diary of use, and monitoring what triggers discomfort, will help guide your dermatologist in a diagnosis through 'patch-testing' certain ingredients. Treatment will vary, but tests have shown that reducing stress levels can play a significant role in improving some skin conditions.



Patch testing

'Natural' ingredients are not always safer

Virtually any substance can trigger an allergy, including natural and naturally-derived substances. The body cannot determine the origin of a substance and does not differentiate between a natural and a synthetic substance. An allergen is simply identified as a threat by the body's immune system. Many natural ingredients can cause allergies as well as synthetic ones.

Find further facts at our dedicated allergy section on our consumer website:
www.thefactsabout.co.uk/allergies



Allergy and Cosmetic Products

How can I avoid ingredients to which I know I'm allergic?

Cosmetic products sold in the European Union (EU) must display a complete ingredients list using an agreed International Nomenclature of Cosmetic Ingredients (INCI). This means the name used for any ingredient will be the same wherever you are in the EU, and increasingly throughout the world as INCI is adopted in other regions also.

Only 2% of the population are actually allergic to fragrance ingredients. 26 of the many hundreds of fragrance ingredients appear to cause a higher incidence of allergy and these are labelled individually to inform consumers. Unless someone with a fragrance allergy knows which particular ingredient(s) they are allergic to, they should avoid all fragrances, shown on the list of ingredients as 'parfum'.



What does 'hypo-allergenic' mean?

'Hypo-' means 'less than' or 'decreased' so when used to describe cosmetics the term hypo-allergenic means 'reduced potential to cause allergic reactions'.

What should I do if I react to a skin sensitivity test?

Manufacturers advise performing a sensitivity test before using permanent hair colorants. A positive reaction is a clear signal that your body has been sensitised to a substance in that product. You must wait 48 hours for the body's biological mechanism to work to see if you react to a test before you can go ahead and colour your hair. If you see redness, swelling or sensitivity (for example skin pricking) then **do not use** the product. Also do not pick another brand since that might contain the same ingredient which led to your reaction. See your doctor or dermatologist to investigate further.

Why should I avoid 'black henna' temporary tattoos?

True henna extract is orange-red in colour. 'Black henna' tattoos are not pure henna. They have been mixed with a chemical called paraphenylenediamine, or 'PPD'. This use of PPD is illegal as it can be very harmful if applied direct to your skin in such high concentrations. It can leave you with a swollen, sore, red 'burn' and can sensitise you to PPD. This means you could react strongly to otherwise safe products such as hair colorants which also contain PPD. Hair colorants themselves are regulated under the stringent EU cosmetic safety regulations and are perfectly safe to use if the instructions are followed carefully.



An adverse reaction to a 'black henna' tattoo

Can I colour my hair whilst I'm pregnant?

Yes. There is no evidence that hair colorants are a problem during pregnancy and they are one of the most studied of all cosmetic products. It is important to follow all of the directions carefully and to carry out a skin sensitivity test according to the manufacturers' instructions. However, some women can be extremely concerned and for them it is better to avoid any anxiety – even though there are no safety concerns from the colouring itself. Highlights might also be an alternative in this instance as they do not touch the scalp. Many women choose to avoid colorants in the first trimester.

For more information on the CTPA's Media Panel please don't hesitate to contact Eleanor O'Connor: eoconnor@ctpa.org.uk.

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