

# The facts about... Allergy

## What is allergy?

- An allergy is the response of the body's immune system\* to normally harmless substances, such as pollens, foods and house dust mites.
- Whilst in most people these substances pose no problem, in allergic individuals their immune system identifies them as a 'threat' and produces an unexpected response for the individual concerned.
- Allergies, like hayfever, are quite common and affect approximately one in four of the population in the UK at some point in their lives.

*\*The immune system describes the body's organs, systems and processes which all work together to protect against infections and other unwanted substances.*



## How does it work?



- Everyone is different and so allergies are personal to you - it's in your genes. Remember some people may never develop an allergy.
- You could become allergic to almost anything, from naturally occurring substances to man-made ones, even if you have previously come into contact with it many times before without a problem.
- This is because allergies can build up undetected over time. After a number of exposures to an allergen, a threshold can be reached which will result in an allergic reaction. It's like a glass of water, once it's full, adding more simply makes the glass overflow.
- Some allergies are more common than others. For example approximately 5% to 10% of the population suffer from food allergies, between 15 to 20% of people have hayfever and around 15% of the population suffer from a nickel allergy.
- How strongly the body reacts to allergens can vary enormously: from severe reactions to things like peanuts, to the discomfort associated with hayfever.
- There are different types of allergy: Some are immediate in onset and others are delayed before you see a reaction. For example sneezing can start straight away after being triggered by animal hair, whereas some reactions appear in the area of contact after 24 to 72 hours.



## Did you know?

- In allergic individuals the substances that cause allergies, are known as allergens.
- Allergens themselves are not harmful on their own. The problem occurs when your body overreacts to the substance and its self-defence mechanism attacks the body as a result.
- Allergic reactions are unlikely to occur after the first, or a single, exposure. The second time that the body meets the allergen, it will recognise it and react to it.


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## What about ingredients in cosmetic products?

*"People can even be allergic to commonly used products. It's not that ingredients in these are unsafe – it's the way the body reacts to them can differ from person to person.*

*"The process of determining the safety and composition of a product is rigorous and great care is taken to constantly re-assess the science behind it. This means a team of scientists will be involved ensuring the latest scientific knowledge and safety evaluation techniques are used. It can take many years to bring a product to market."*

Dr Emma Meredith, CTPA Director-General and Pharmacist

 The number of reactions to permanent hair dyes, e.g. para-phenylenediamine (PPD), is very low, between 0.3 and 4.3 for every million products sold. PPD-like hair dyes are used because they are the best way to achieve permanent hair colour and are the only way of successfully colouring grey hair. They are safe to use when the instructions are followed carefully, which includes performing an Allergy Alert Test.

 Allergic reactions to fragrance ingredients are also rare; however they do sometimes occur. All cosmetics that contain fragrances will have the word 'parfum' in the ingredients list. Also those ingredients that are considered more likely to cause reactions in susceptible people will be declared separately in the list of ingredients, if they are present above a certain level.

## Formulating a cosmetic product is a fine balance

It's like making a cake; you need to choose the right ingredients in the right quantities to make sure your cake has the desired smell, texture and taste. It's very difficult to substitute an ingredient without compromising safety and changing the look, feel or effectiveness of the end product.

## What to do if you think you've had an allergic reaction to a cosmetic product

CTPA has produced a **guide** to help explain what to do if you have experienced a reaction to a cosmetic product.

The majority of people in the UK safely use cosmetic products without any problems. However a small number of people will have a reaction to certain ingredients.

If you believe you have had an allergic reaction to a cosmetic product:

- Stop using the suspected product and wash off any remaining product that you may have applied.
- Please seek advice from a healthcare professional.
- In all cases, please contact the company and let them know. If you have contacted the retailer where you bought the product, please also let the company or manufacturer know.

## Did you know?

- There is a small pool of safe and effective preservatives that are allowed to be used in cosmetic products. Only a few have the rare quality of being able to work across a variety of products in order to keep them safe and microorganism-free whilst at the same time not changing the formulation of a product such as the look, feel or smell.
- Some people are allergic to some preservatives. It's a balancing act: preservatives are needed to keep products bug free, but unfortunately some people maybe allergic to some of them.

## How to do an Allergy Alert Test before colouring your hair

Always perform an Allergy Alert Test everytime you colour your hair



Under 2% of the population has the potential to become allergic to ingredients in hair colorants. But as allergies may develop over time, an Allergy Alert Test should be carried out each time you colour your hair.



Always read and follow the manufacturer's instructions found in the pack.



You DO NOT need to buy a second pack to do the Allergy Alert Test. Just re-close the packs after taking out a small amount, mixed or not as instructed.



Apply a small amount of the mixture on the inner forearm as instructed. Leave the mixture applied for 45 minutes without covering or touching it, then wash off after 45 minutes or as instructed on the product packaging.



Wait 48 hours as reactions to hair dyes are 'delayed contact allergies' so can take this long to show up. If you react to the Allergy Alert Test DO NOT go on to colour your hair.

### Where can I find out more?

[www.thefactsabout.co.uk/allergies](http://www.thefactsabout.co.uk/allergies)