

Saving our skin

From anti-ageing cream to toothpaste: cosmetics are found everywhere in our everyday lives. This is precisely why there are high standards intended to minimise the risks of adverse effects on health.



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Warnings about supposedly harmful ingredients in cosmetic products of all kinds – be it colourants in hair dyes, parabens in deodorants or nanoparticles in toothpaste – continue to circulate on social media. “There are strict requirements for the safety of cosmetics across Europe,” explains Dr Ralph Pirow, a toxicologist at the German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR). He deals with the safety of consumer products, including cosmetics. “It is quite simple. Cosmetics that pose a health risk cannot be sold or distributed.” Whether young or old – most people use cosmetic products such as creams, shower gels, deodorants or sun creams every day and in large amounts. “This is why the standards for their safety are particularly high in comparison to other consumer products,” explains Pirow.

Cosmetics do not have to be approved in advance. But manufacturers are obliged to conduct a safety assessment.



Only assessed colourants, preservatives and UV filters can be used in cosmetics.

CLEAR REGULATIONS IN GERMANY AND EUROPE

This is all set out in the EU Cosmetics Regulation. While new products do not have to be approved in advance, the manufacturers are obligated to conduct a safety assessment. In doing so, both the finished product and the individual ingredients are assessed. A product can only be sold and distributed if it is “safe for human health during normal and reasonably foreseeable use”.

Clear requirements also apply to this safety assessment. These requirements are laid out in the Notes of Guidance of the European Commission’s Scientific Committee on Consumer Safety (SCCS) which are continuously adapted to the current state of knowledge. Colourants, preservatives and UV filters can only be used if they

have been assessed by SCCS and included in a “positive list”. There is also a negative list for substances that are not permitted for use. In Germany, market surveillance authorities of the individual federal states monitor compliance with the requirements. If non-compliant products are found during laboratory testing or undesired effects are reported back by consumers, the market surveillance authorities can interact with the manufacturers to initiate a withdrawal of the product from the market or issue a warning in the European rapid alert system “Safety Gate” for example.

“A REAL SUCCESS STORY”

The BfR also deals with questions around the safety of cosmetics ingredients. It advises the federal government and prepares health risk assessments, which are used to inform the public or to initiate a safety assessment by the SCCS. Based on this, the legal framework can be adjusted and, if necessary, ingredients can be banned.

PLASTICISERS IN SUN PROTECTION

At the start of 2024, traces of the plasticiser DnHexP were detected in some sun creams containing a certain UV filter. DnHexP itself is banned as an ingredient in cosmetics. It became apparent that DnHexP occurs in small amounts unintentionally during the manufacture of the UV filter. In light of this the BfR conducted a risk assessment. The concentrations found in sun screens are relatively low according to this assessment. In the BfR's estimation, adverse health effects caused by using these products are therefore very unlikely.

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In addition to colourants, preservatives and UV filters, scientists at the BfR are also focusing on fragrances. While fragrances may provide a nice scent or cover up unpleasant odours, some might cause skin irritation or allergic reactions. This is why the presence of certain fragrances known to cause an allergic reaction in susceptible individuals must be declared on their packaging, so that people affected can avoid them.

“Overall consumer health protection when it comes to cosmetic products is a real success story,” says Ralph Pirow. “The EU regulations for cosmetics guarantee a high level of consumer protection. And they cover thousands of different products used by millions of people every day.” —

More information



BfR-FAQ
“Cosmetics”

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