

Hidden hazards of 10 everyday products

Some can cause minor symptoms; others can lead to major problems

Sometimes it's the little things that cause big problems. Everyday products meant to help you look and feel better can actually have the opposite effect. We're talking about stuff like eye drops, lip balm, and mouthwash; if you're not careful, you can wind up bleary-eyed or dry-lipped, or with a lingering bad taste in your mouth.

Fortunately, the fixes are all pretty simple. With the help of experts, we've put together a top 10 list of common products that can cause unintended side effects, as well as advice on what to do to set things right.



Aerosol hair spray

Not only are the chemicals used to propel hair spray damaging to the environment, but they aren't good for your lungs, either. Aerosol sprays of all types, including hair sprays, can trigger allergies and asthma attacks. And using them in a small, poorly ventilated space—yes, like a bathroom—almost guarantees that you'll be breathing in the stuff.

Not surprisingly, a 2010 study involving 50 hairdressers and a control group found that the salon workers had far more respiratory symptoms, such as coughing and breathlessness. They reported that the two most irritating products they used were bleaching powder (used to mix hair color) and hair spray.

WHAT TO DO

Swap aerosol hair sprays for the pump type. The chemicals are more likely to wind up directly on your hair rather than wafting around the room. And if you're sensitive to a spray, you might be better off using a pump. Always close your mouth and eyes when you spray, and if you are able to, crack open a window or turn on the exhaust fan.



Contact lenses

Even people who think they do a good job of taking care of their lenses often have bad habits that put them at risk for rare but potentially blinding infections. That's what researchers found when they questioned more than 400 lens wearers. For example, many knew it was important to clean their case but not that it needed to be replaced regularly. "Bacteria form a film that is resistant to germ-killing solutions," says the lead author of the study, Danielle Robertson, Ph.D., an assistant professor of ophthalmology at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas. Also, people often underestimate the danger of water, which can transfer harmful microorganisms to contact lenses.

WHAT TO DO

- Always wash your hands with soap and dry them before touching lenses.
- Clean your lens case. Dump the used solution, rub the case with a bit of fresh solution, and rinse with more. Air dry, and replace it every three months.
- Never rinse lenses in water. Don't shower or swim in them or wear them with goggles. Consider disposables.



Mouthwash

The Internet is full of reports from people who claim that swishing with a mouthwash stained their teeth brown or at least temporarily affected their sense of taste. Many blame Crest Pro-Health. According to the American Dental Association, the ingredient responsible is cetylpyridinium chloride, which is also found in other products, including Cepacol Antibacterial. Prescription rinses containing the ingredient chlorhexidine cause more severe issues.

WHAT TO DO

If your sense of taste isn't right, stop using your mouthwash to see if that's the culprit. Things should return to normal fairly quickly. Also, any brown spots that appear should go away after some good brushing. And you may want to rethink your dental routine. You may not need a mouthwash. "Most of these products are essentially worthless," says Jay W. Friedman, D.D.S., M.P.H., a public-health dental consultant. "People are spending a lot of money on these thinking that they will give them sweet-smelling breath or make their mouth healthier, and that's generally not the case." Regular flossing, brushing, and professional cleaning are all that most people need to keep their teeth and gums healthy. Chronic bad breath may be due to a digestive issue. A rinse will only mask the odor for a few minutes and won't address the underlying problem. An exception: If you have gum disease or need certain dental work, your dentist may recommend a chlorhexidine rinse for a short time to help control bacteria.



Lip balm

Can you become addicted to it? Not really, says Amy Newburger, a dermatologist at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center in New York City. But if you find yourself reaching for the stuff often, the balm itself may be to blame. "The product may make your lips feel good in the short-term, but it's not uncommon to develop a contact allergy to one or more of the ingredients," Newburger says. "You wind up using it more and more to counteract the irritation; it sets up a vicious cycle." The worst-offending components are usually dyes, flavoring, and fragrances. Products containing glycolic acid can also be irritating, Newburger says.

WHAT TO DO

If your lips are chronically chapped, Newburger recommends trying plain old petroleum jelly for a week. Once the problem is resolved, if you want to resume using a balm, look for a brand that has no added fragrance or color, such as Dr. Bronner's Organic lip balm.

Cotton swabs

About half of the people who see an otolaryngologist (an ear, nose, and throat doc) for any reason admit to cleaning their ears using cotton swabs. The swabs may look harmless, but a recent study found a direct link between their use and ruptured eardrums. So skip them, says the study's author, Ilaaf Darrat, M.D., an otolaryngologist at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit. "They can introduce bacteria into the ear and lead to infection," she says. "And if placed too deeply, they can rupture the eardrum, possibly causing permanent hearing loss."

WHAT TO DO

"Ear wax protects our ears," Darrat says. "There's no reason to remove it unless it builds up to the point that it obstructs your hearing." If ear wax is bothersome, you can try removing it with an over-the-counter product such as Debrox. The safest approach: See your doctor, who can easily flush it out.



Eye makeup

Do you hang on to your mascara for months on end? Leave your makeup bag in a hot car? Use a little water or saliva to moisten your eye pencil so that it goes on easier? Any of those things can put you at risk for a serious eye infection. The Food and Drug Administration reports that in rare cases, infections have led to temporary or permanent blindness.

"Eye cosmetics are required to contain preservatives," Newburger says, "but every time you use these products you introduce contaminants." Adding water, for example—even just a little—can introduce bacteria and dilute the preservatives that are supposed to kill them. Adding saliva definitely adds bacteria and dilutes the preservatives. Plus, the preservatives deteriorate over time, and heat hastens the process.

WHAT TO DO

- Wash your hands before applying your eye makeup.
- When you buy new mascara, write the date on it with a permanent marker and toss it after two to four months. Cake eye shadow and liners last longer, but Newburger recommends discarding them at least once a year.
- Store makeup in a cool, dry place such as a bedroom drawer (not in a bathroom medicine cabinet!). Make sure the room never gets above 85° F.
- If you develop an eye infection, stop using cosmetics in the area until it clears. Discard any products you were using when you got the infection.
- Don't share cosmetics. If you're getting your makeup done, ask the stylist not to use the same products on you that were used on someone else.

Vaginal douches

An estimated 20 percent to 40 percent of women in the U.S. douche regularly, persuaded by advertisements that it will make them "fresher," "cleaner," or "healthier." But what douches actually do is kill good bacteria and upset the natural acidic environment inside the body. That leaves women more vulnerable to sexually transmitted disease as well as conditions such as yeast infections and bacterial vaginosis. If you have an infection, douching can push the bacteria up into the uterus, fallopian

tubes, and ovaries, possibly leading to pelvic inflammatory disease.

WHAT TO DO

The American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommends against douching. Vaginas are self-cleaning. If you notice a strong odor or irritation, it usually means something is wrong, and you should talk with a doctor. All you need to do is wash carefully using a mild soap. To further reduce the risk of vaginal infections, avoid scented tampons, pads, powders, and sprays.

Acid reducers

Proton pump inhibitors, or PPIs, reduce the amount of acid the stomach produces and are used to treat gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), persistent heartburn, indigestion, and ulcers. Prescription and OTC drugs include omeprazole (Prilosec, Prilosec OTC, Zegerid, or generic), and lansoprazole (Prevacid and Prevacid 24HR). Those drugs are effective and relatively safe, but they can cause serious side effects. Studies have found that people who took PPIs every day for a year or more had a higher risk of fractures, possibly because the drugs decrease calcium absorption. In addition, PPIs may increase the risk of serious bacterial infections by suppressing the stomach acid that would normally kill the germs.

WHAT TO DO

For occasional indigestion or heartburn, consider an OTC antacid such as Maalox, Mylanta, Rolaids, or Tums. Or consider H2 blockers, which take up to an hour to kick in, but relief lasts up to 12 hours. Nonprescription versions include cimetidine (Tagamet OTC), famotidine (Pepcid AC), nizatidine (Axid AR), and ranitidine (Zantac 75 and Zantac 150); all come in generics. Also try to avoid spicy, acidic, and fatty foods, and cut down on alcohol, caffeine, and carbonated drinks. Stopping smoking and losing weight help, too. Also, after you eat, don't lie down for 3 hours, and try chewing gum. If you've tried those treatments and heartburn is still bothering you or it happens at least twice weekly for weeks or months on end, or if you frequently regurgitate food into your throat or mouth, see your doctor to determine whether you have GERD, which is best treated with a PPI.

Eye drops

Eye drops such as Visine Original, which promises it "gets the red out," can also put the red in if you use them too often. Those eye whiteners work by constricting blood vessels in the eyes for a couple of hours, but overuse causes a rebound effect in which the vessels dilate, leaving your eyes redder than ever. In addition, preservatives in eye drops can cause redness and irritation in some people.

WHAT TO DO

Eye whiteners are fine for occasional use, but if you are using them frequently to keep redness at bay, go cold turkey. If things don't clear up in a couple of days, you should make an appointment to see an eye doctor.



Hydrogen peroxide and other first-aid treatments for cuts

Do you still swab cuts and scrapes with old standbys such as alcohol, hydrogen peroxide, iodine, or mercurochrome? If so, it's time to update your first-aid technique. That's because those products usually don't clean wounds any better than plain old soap and water, and they might even irritate healthy tissue.

WHAT TO DO

The best way to treat a scrape is to clean the area with soap and water, making sure to flush out any debris. Then dab on triple antibiotic ointment (such as Neosporin or a generic version) and cover the wound with a bandage. See a doctor if the area becomes red, swollen, warm, or throbs with pain, which are signs of infection. If you don't have access to clean water, reach for alcohol or hydrogen peroxide instead, and then apply triple antibiotic ointment. Those products might be good to take along when you're traveling.

