

saving face

How many toxic chemicals have you been exposed to today? We bust the beauty myth

words rebecca dellman

When Adelaide Hills mum Melanie Leigh first heard about 'parabens' through her friend's breast cancer specialist, she began to feel increasingly alarmed about the huge number of chemical-based products our bodies are exposed to every day – beauty lotions, toothpaste, shampoo, conditioner, styling products, washing powders, disinfectants, cleaners; even leather polishes for the couches we sit on.

"I have always suffered with poor skin and my mum has terrible dermatitis/eczema. I am interested in what goes into our bodies and how it affects us," she says. "All sorts of conditions seem to be on the increase – cancers, eczema, allergies, etc – and the more you read up on the chemicals around us in our homes and offices, the more you realise that we may be affected by them."

Keen to find safe alternatives, Leigh and her husband Adrian launched No Nasties (www.nonasties.com.au) in 2007: an online store for toxic-free baby products, skin care, feminine hygiene and cosmetics. "We want to be known as a shop you can trust to buy anything from and you'll know it's okay," Leigh says.

The Leighs are not the only ones waving the flag for a toxic-free lifestyle. Adelaide businesswomen Rose Bradshaw, Barbara Gare and Colleen Marshall have the combined passion, science and know-how to raise the bar to an entirely new level – the result being their Y Natural skincare range, launched in 2005.

"I'm only 43 and I've already lost my third friend to breast cancer," says Gare, a former geophysicist. "There are all sorts of things that we need to change if we want to reduce our exposure to chemicals. Why not do the easy ones [like switching to pure beauty products] first?"

Y Natural's stance? No carcinogenic, mutagenic and hormone-disruptive ingredients; no silicone or petrochemicals, synthetic alcohols, paraben-based preservatives, artificial colours or fragrances; no ingredients that have been part of a petrochemical process, including

solvent extracted oils (such as jasmine) and ethoxylated 'plant-derived' ingredients (like cocobetaine and emulsifying wax); no chemical fillers, plasticisers, texture enhancers or other synthetics; no animal testing; and only the highest calibre certified organic ingredients. All of which is much easier said than done, which is why your average supermarket product (and even your average 'all-natural' product) does not adhere to such exact, expensive and difficult standards. "What might cost you 50c for parabens is probably costing us \$20 with what we use," says Gare. "It's like having to be a cordon bleu chef instead of flipping burgers at McDonald's. There are alternatives but they're much more expensive to use, and they're also harder to work with."

"[Cosmetic ingredient] legislation was largely created in the 70s, back in the days when skin was regarded as something that [kept] things out. Now, of course, we use hormone, analgesic and nicotine patches because we know that things get in," she continues. "And depending what research you're reading, 70-80 per cent or more is getting into your blood stream from what you apply to your skin... and from there going to lymph, liver, bladder, across the placenta, into breast milk, into the brain, into all different parts of your body."

Caroline Bugg spent years working as a beauty therapist and a promotional consultant for some of the world's biggest cosmetic companies before growing suspicious about what she was slathering on her body. After undergoing her own research, she then developed SkinThings in 2003, whose website explains: "The more she started digging, the more dirt she found! For example, chemicals such as propylene glycol are used to make brake fluid and anti-freeze. It has absolutely NO business being used in your moisturiser!"

SkinThings' Glenelg store – which now stocks about 40 face- and body-care products, shampoos and conditioners, herbal teas, non-fluoride toothpaste, natural perfumes, mineral makeup, chemical-free sunscreen, aluminium

and paraben-free deodorants – was purchased by Nicole Hepple in 2005, who was already an avid consumer of totally natural products because "there are no toxins that you're putting onto your skin. Chemicals are not natural, so how does your body know how to deal with them? It always compensates in another way – you'll get spots or it's going to come out somewhere else in your body."

Agrees Gare: "Chemicals coating the skin are not actually contributing in any way to its health and wellbeing. So if you want your skin to be healthy, don't undermine it by giving it the equivalent of junk food every day. No wonder people's skin looks tired in the morning, it's been up all night trying to process all that rubbish and get rid of it all, and you wake up with the skin equivalent of a hangover."

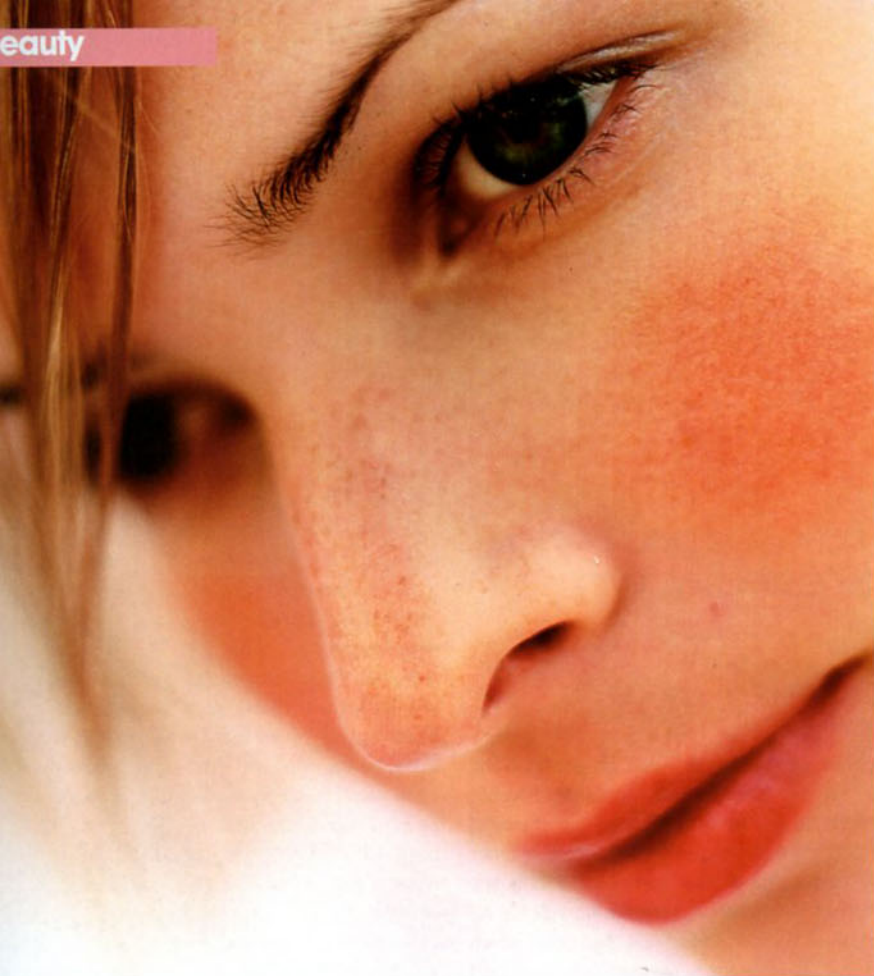
Shockingly, if you analysed the contents of your average bathroom, laundry or even kitchen products, you might discover some "known carcinogens that are banned overseas – and yet we can use them in our mainstream products", reveals Gare. "That to me is really horrifying."

"If you think to yourself, 'the government wouldn't let the shops sell something if it was bad for you', then think again," says Leigh. Research has shown that the average woman who wears face creams and makeup on a daily basis absorbs over 2kg of chemicals through her skin every year. Of the 7000 cosmetic ingredients available to manufacturers, more than 1000 have known harmful effects and a further 900 are potentially cancer-causing.

Parabens (a preservative in most skincare products) have been found in breast cancer tissue and, in a recent study by the Environmental Working Group (a non-profit environmental research organisation in Washington DC), babies treated with common baby lotions, shampoo and powder had a high concentration of phthalates in their urine (chemicals linked to allergies, sex organ deformities and eczema). The umbilical cord blood of 10 babies born in US hospitals in 2004 contained a staggering 287 chemicals – of which 180 are known to cause cancer in humans or animals, 217 are toxic to the brain and nervous system, and 208 cause birth defects or abnormal development in animal tests.

In August, the online *Journal of Investigative Dermatology* reported that four moisturisers used by millions of people caused skin cancer when rubbed on mice. When scientists repeated the experiments with a cream lacking several suspect ingredients – including mineral oil and sodium lauryl sulphate – cancer rates dropped.

The problem, points out Hepple, is that when it comes to reading the ingredients list on the



BELOW from top:
 Detox Oil, \$38.50,
 SkinThings 8294 0022;
 501 Protect Anti-Age
 Moisturiser, \$80.30,
 Y Natural 8272 5409;
 Moisturising Lotion
 SPF30+, \$41.95,
 Kosmea 1300 130 320.

the super-naturals

How to navigate your way to guilt-free local skincare

BEESWAX NATURAL HEALTH & HARMONY

The beauty, skin, baby and household products in this Hahndorf store contain the purest quality, natural beeswax blended with natural, organic and essential oils, butters, waxes, herbs and flowers. Mix dry scrubs with water or plain yoghurt to apply as a paste. Visit www.beeswaxnhh.com.au.

BROOKLAN TREE A gentle brand that uses recyclable packaging, natural and certified organic ingredients where possible. Visit www.brooklantree.com.au.

CLARISCENTS A sufferer of chemical sensitivities, Georgina Leverink used her skills as a clinical researcher to develop her own range of cleansers, toners and moisturisers. Her 'clean' ethical brand launched in 2003. Visit www.naturallysafe.com.au.

GREENLEAF NATURAL Adelaide Hills husband-and-wife team Bob and Sandra Greenleaf produce soaps, creams and shampoos that are free from parabens, petroleum by-products, detergents, animal fats, sodium laureth sulphate and animal testing. Visit www.greenleafnatural.com.

KOSMEA Best-loved for its cure-all organic rosehip oil, Kosmea is firmly against mineral oils, artificial colours and fragrances, petrochemicals, sodium lauryl sulphate, animal ingredients and animal testing, and uses recyclable packaging. Check its website for an extensive list of toxic ingredients to avoid. Visit www.kosmea.com.au.

KUUSH When doctors told Catherine Griss that certain skincare ingredients can cause spontaneous abortion, she created Kuush: a range that's certified organic with NASAA, the oldest certifying body in Australia. Kuush contains no carcinogens, petrochemicals, synthetic ingredients or preservatives. It's certified halal and is not tested on animals. Kuush also has a carbon neutral tree-planting program. Visit www.kuush.com.au.

OUTSIDE SA Aromababy Toxic-free products for newborns, www.aromababy.com.

Miessence Chemical-free beauty, dental and household products, www.mionegroup.com.

Pangea A US company founded on excellent integrity, www.pangeaorganics.com.

Shizen Boasting 'nothing-to-hide ingredients', www.shizen.com.au.

Weleda Super-safe skincare for men, women and babies, www.welada.com.au.

Zoya Nail polishes free from toxic carcinogens, www.artofbeauty.com.au.

CYBER CHECK Head online to discover whether your favourite brands are 'safe' using www.cosmeticsdatabase.com.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT... The Chemical Maze: The Shopping Companion, Your Guide to Food Additives and Cosmetic Ingredients by Bill Statham [\$15.95, www.possibility.com.au].

back of a tub of moisturiser, "most people don't actually know what all the words mean".

"Don't just take everything at face value, because the words 'natural' and 'organic' have been pretty misused and abused," she warns.

Hepple is referring to a phenomenon known as 'greenwashing'. Countless companies are eager to jump on the 'organic' buzzword bandwagon – without the integrity to match. "If they [products] have material in it that comes originally from a plant source, they can call it 'organic' even if it's been through pretty significant chemical processes," explains Gare. "You can basically have a chemical cocktail, throw in a bit of parsley as a garnish, and then suddenly you've got a 'natural product'."

Says Leigh: "It's incredibly hard to find products that are completely natural. As for 'natural' and 'organic', well, that's a minefield. What do those words really mean? There has been no official definition." In short? If it's not 'certified' [ACO – Australian Certified Organic], then it's not organic. But even though your favourite 'organic' cream contains certified organic ingredients, it doesn't mean the entire product is. And watch out for companies who only list 'key ingredients' – you're not being shown the whole story. Nasty emulsifiers and preservatives have probably been dropped off the list. "If you use less than three per cent of the volume in the product, you don't have to put it on your label," confirms Hepple.

When it comes to organic certification, it's good to know that Australia upholds the most strict standards in the world. Europe's Ecocert does not follow nearly as many rules and regulations. "[A UK designer brand] has come

out with a lot of fanfare about their certified organic skincare, but it wouldn't get across the line here in Australia because the rules here are much more strict," says Gare.

And what about the women who believe their \$200 luxury French cream is the only thing that's capable of combating ageing? "You do get those ladies who are convinced that they need chemicals," laughs Hepple. "I always used products with chemicals in them before, but my skin has never been so good since I changed over." Adds Gare: "People think that, 'if you really want it to work, it needs to have chemicals'. I just don't get it. Why would you pay top dollar to have chemicals that have been untested put on your skin?"

Fortunately, the future looks bright as more and more consumers sit up and take notice. "There does seem to be a lot of voices out there that are calling for people to create standards and to adhere to certain guidelines at the moment. People are saying, 'It's not doing our industry any good for us to be this inconsistent'. So at last there are changes afoot," says Gare.

The growing number of South Australian companies that have launched safe and friendly beauty products is also a positive step. "I think there is enough happening in SA for us to have a critical mass, and if we cooperate in the way that the wine regions have – to have SA thought of as a hub – we could become known as a skincare mecca. That would do a lot of good as an industry," says Gare. "If 20 companies are each being a voice for this, that's going to be a whole lot more powerful than just one. And if we can become the catalyst for change across the world, that's a really great thing." ☐

