



Hot Topics in Personal Care

These abbreviated statements are intended to provide a balanced and informative context for some current personal care product topics that can be potentially confusing to understand based on manufacturer claims alone.

Is phenoxyethanol good or bad?

In response to consumer concerns about paraben preservatives, many cosmetic companies switched to phenoxyethanol. Often described as “naturally derived,” it is accepted by some third-party natural certifiers as an allowable synthetic. Recently, however, phenoxyethanol has become somewhat controversial.

Phenoxyethanol is an ethoxylated compound, meaning that it is processed with ethylene oxide (a petrochemical). Due to this process, the end ingredient (phenoxyethanol in this case) may contain a trace amount of 1,4-dioxane, a by-product that’s classified by the EPA as a likely human carcinogen. You will not see 1,4-dioxane listed on a label because it is not intentionally added or used as a cosmetic ingredient.

Best Practice: Keep an eye on this ingredient. While it is likely an improvement over parabens, its potential risks are not fully defined at this time.

What are microbeads and how do I find them listed on a label?

Microbeads are primarily found in body scrubs, face wash, soaps, and toothpaste. Numerous studies have documented that these tiny plastic particles are water pollutants that cause physical and toxicological effects on aquatic organisms and wildlife. Several states have passed microbead bans, and a nationwide ban has also been introduced to the House of Representatives.

Best Practice: Avoid purchasing products that include microbeads in the formulations. They won’t show up on ingredient declarations as “microbeads,” so you’ll need to search for the following: polyethylene, polypropylene, polymethyl methacrylate, nylon, or polyethylene terephthalate.

How do I know for sure if “cruelty-free” claims are truthful?

Unless backed by a cruelty-free third party certification (e.g., Leaping Bunny, Caring Consumer), this claim can be unclear or misleading.

Some products may not display cruelty-free certifications specifically, but they may have undergone natural or organic third party certification which sometimes addresses this issue. Cosmetic certifying bodies generally prohibit animal testing in their standards, indicating that they do not support this type of experimentation for raw materials or end products. However, some standards may include a caveat that states “except where required by law,” as some countries require it.

Best Practice: For products without any third party certifications, at least two questions should be asked: (1) Is the claim based on the finished product and/or on all of the raw materials used? (2) Who is responsible for tracking and keeping up with whether or not the products and/or raw materials were not tested on animals?

Does “chemical-free” and “natural” mean the same thing?

No. First, there is no such thing as a “chemical-free” formulation. Essential oils, water, and salt are all chemicals. Second, “natural” is a very subjective term. Since there is no legal definition of natural, it is up to the brand to determine its own definition. Brands marketing their products as “natural” should define what it means so the user is not misled.

Best Practice: Don’t promote “chemical-free” or “natural” as meaningful claims unless you understand and also share specifically what the manufacturer means by that statement.

Does “hypoallergenic” mean that it’s safe for sensitive skin?

Not necessarily. The FDA says, “There are no federal standards or definitions that govern the use of the term ‘hypoallergenic.’ The term means whatever a particular company wants it to mean. Manufacturers of cosmetics labeled as hypoallergenic are not required to submit substantiation of their hypoallergenicity claims to FDA.” Therefore, this claim has no standard definition, requirement, or meaning.

Best Practice: Inquire of your product supply company as to the specifics of this claim and be prepared to train your staff to understand and be able to explain the potential risks of an allergic response accurately.

Does “preservative-free” mean that a product is safer or better for you?

Not necessarily. Depending on the formulation and the packaging, a truly preservative-free product risks being contaminated during manufacturing or by the user. Also, the

term “preservative-free” may not mean that it is free of ingredients that help preserve the product.

Some brands utilize other ingredients that aren’t classified as preservatives but these ingredients may possess antimicrobial properties. For example, caprylyl glycol is classified as a humectant and emollient, but it demonstrates antimicrobial efficacy.

Further, classifying all preservatives as “unsafe” or “hazardous” isn’t good practice. There are several good, effective nature-identical preservatives that are approved by natural and organic third party certifications.

Best Practice: Be aware of the shelf life of your products and understand the specific technology used to prolong each product’s potency and efficacy so that you can clearly communicate to your guests.

The purpose of the Green Spa Network Personal Care Committee is to educate, inform, and raise awareness of the issues related to personal care products, ingredients, formulations, and certifications, so that spa decision makers and personal care manufacturers can make choices that reflect the values and practices of sustainability, consumer safety, and efficacy.