

HAIR COLOUR – WORTH DYEING FOR?



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I'm told that there are only so many grey hairs one can pluck out. At some point, one has to make a choice: go grey or apply a hair dye (a permanent hair dye for best results).

Those who go the permanent hair dye route are likely to be familiar with the burning sensation, irritation on the scalp and distinctive strong smell during application. We may try to overlook the chemicals on our heads, focusing instead on the glamorous results, but as consumers become sceptical about industry claims and knowledgeable about the environment and the products they use, more and more are demanding to know just how safe, or unsafe, hair dye really is.¹

Probably the greatest difference between the dyes or colourants used in historical times and those of today is that the older versions would have been natural, whereas most modern hair dyes are chemically constituted.

This is significant when you take into consideration that more than 60% of women and up to 10% of men (depending on the country), regularly dye their hair.² Market research also indicates that more and more people are dyeing their hair, and are doing so at a younger age.³

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According to Dr Christopher Flower, director-general of the Cosmetic, Toiletry and Perfumery Association (CTPA) in the UK, hair dyes are safe when used as recommended in the instructions, and consumers can use them with confidence.⁴

However, the European Commission (Scientific Committee on Consumer Products (SCCP)) is involved in an ongoing safety investigation prompted by a study linking hair dye usage to bladder cancer.² Research published in the *International Journal of Cancer* in 2001 concluded: 'After adjustment for cigarette smoking, a major risk factor for bladder cancer, women who used permanent hair dyes at least once a month experienced a 2.1-fold risk of bladder cancer relative to non-users'.⁵

A study published in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* in 2004 suggests that the proportion of lymphomas in the female population that could be attributable to hair dyes is about 10%.⁶ Another study, called Epi-lymph, across six European countries, found an increased risk of lymphoma associated with hair dye use.⁷

However, an article published in May 2005 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, stated, 'We did not find strong evidence of a marked increase in the risk of cancer among personal hair dye users. Some aspects related to haematopoietic cancer and other cancers that have shown evidence of increased risk in 1 or 2 studies should be investigated further'.⁸

Many other studies have been published, some highlighting dangers and others proving inconclusive, but for now, is this something we can simply ignore?

What experts do agree on is that common chemical ingredients used to facilitate the permanent colouring process such as ammonia, resorcinol, paraben and PPD (p-phenylenediamine) are allergens – substances that can cause an allergic reaction when in contact with the body – although sensitivities will range substantially from person to person.

One of the biggest culprits is ammonia – the same ingredient used in many household cleaning products and also the reason why hair dye burns the scalp and smells so strong.

Another culprit is PPD. Researchers from the St John's Institute of Dermatology in London warn that PPD and related agents, found in most hair dyes, can trigger allergic reactions, such as facial dermatitis and even facial swelling.⁹

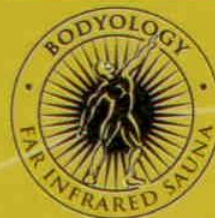
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According to researchers based at St Thomas' Hospital, there are no satisfactory or widely accepted alternatives to PPD and related agents, available for use in permanent hair dyes.⁹

Interestingly, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the organisation responsible for overseeing the safety of cosmetics sold in the USA, is not able to prohibit the sale of hair dyes, even though hair straighteners and hair dyes are among the FDA's top consumer complaint areas.¹⁰

According to the FDA, this is due to an extraordinary situation where hair colouring made from coal tar was given special exemption from bans when the Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act was passed in 1938, due to lobbying pressure from the coal tar hair dye manufacturing industry at the time. The sole provision was that product labels had to include a skin irritation/allergy warning.¹¹

than conventional hair dyes. Current European legislation allows PPD to comprise up to 6% of the constituents of hair dyes, and this product contains between 0.8% and 0.9% in most of the colours, with a maximum of 2.1% in the darkest colour. Instead of using ammonia, plant-based alkalines such as Cinchona are used.

Consumers should select products that have the least amount of chemicals (lighter shades contain lower levels than darker shades) and must perform patch tests each time they apply any hair dye, as an allergy can develop over time.

With everything in life there are trade-offs. Most of us are not ashamed to want to look our best and know all too well the value of the right hair colour, and the effect it has on our self-esteem. It's about where we take our risks and it's vital to make informed decisions, read product labels and be aware of possible product sensitivities. 

Consumers are on their own when deciding whether these products are safe.

Although many modern hair dyes derive their ingredients from petroleum sources, they are considered coal tar dyes by the FDA because they contain some of the same compounds found in the older dyes. This essentially means that as long as they carry skin irritation/allergy warnings, most hair dyes sold in the USA, and exported to the rest of the world, do not have to go through the pre-market safety testing that other cosmetic colour additives do, before hitting the shelves. So how does one decide what to use?

The most well-known alternative, henna, might be widely available and more natural, however it poses its own problems. Henna creates a solid coating around the hair shaft, preventing other colour treatments and processes, such as perms, from taking. While some women love the body henna gives to hair, others complain about its grey coverage and colour options.

When it comes to true permanent colour that does everything that we expect from top conventional brands, like covering grey, there is nothing on the world market that is completely natural.

There is a more natural product in South Africa that covers grey and promises no ammonia, paraben and resorcinol as well as substantially lower concentrations of PPD and hydrogen peroxide

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