

# Documentary Sheds Light on Toxic Household Products

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

December 08, 2023

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › U.S. manufacturers of baby care, household and personal care products are not required to fully disclose toxic ingredients, even if those ingredients could be hazardous to your health
- › The word “fragrance” is a catch-all term that refers not to a single ingredient but rather one or more of nearly 3,000 synthetic chemicals that may damage your health
- › U.S. trade organizations, such as the American Chemistry Council, spend hundreds of millions of dollars annually to aggressively back manufacturers in a joint effort to conceal toxic ingredients

***Editor’s Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published April 8, 2017.***

A family-oriented documentary called "Stink!"<sup>1</sup> shines a bright light on the unregulated use of toxic chemicals in U.S. consumer products, from baby wipes and shampoo to floor cleaners and laundry detergents.

The idea for the film originated from director Jon Whelan's experience in tracking down the source of a strong chemical odor that wafted off new pajamas he'd purchased for his two young daughters.

After discovering the toxic stench was a trade secret held by the parent company of popular American tween store Justice, Whelan began investigating the fragrance industry, which he suggests is valued at \$100 billion.

What Whelan found is that manufacturers, with the aggressive backing of the chemical industry, routinely conceal thousands of potentially toxic ingredients in the baby care, household and personal care products you and your family use every day.

They do so by using the term "fragrance," which is entirely free of government oversight and safety regulations.<sup>2</sup>

Lack of regulation means that when you see the word fragrance on product labels, it does not refer to a single ingredient, but likely dozens of toxic chemicals in combination. For example, S.C. Johnson's fresh citrus blossom-scented Glade PlugIns oil refill contains a whopping 60 chemical components, which are encompassed under a single word on the product label: fragrance.

According to the Geneva-based International Fragrance Association (IFRA), the self-regulating body of the global fragrance industry, about 3,000 specific chemicals fall under the term fragrance.<sup>3</sup>

When you purchase a product that lists fragrance as one of the ingredients, you have no way of knowing how many chemicals reside within, or how those chemicals might interact with each other. Many of the chemicals are synthetic – often petroleum based – and increasingly linked to chronic health conditions.

## **Safety and Regulation of US Consumer Goods Is Weak**

You may be surprised to know that legislation put in place in the U.S. in 1976 – a measure called the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA) – has perhaps done more harm than good in terms of regulating the chemicals used in products that you use daily.

Notably, TSCA grandfathered in some 80,000 chemicals that are ready available and can be easily incorporated into all kinds of consumer products manufactured and sold in the U.S. As such, these chemicals bypass safety testing and remain free of federal government regulation and oversight. Stacy Malkan, co-founder of the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics comments:<sup>4</sup>

*"The chemical industry has gotten away with producing billions of tons of chemicals without doing safety studies, putting them out into the environment ... and into products that are ... in our homes. Basically we are living in a 'toxic soup,' and it's a giant experiment on human health."*

It may surprise you to learn that U.S. regulatory agencies such as the Consumer Products Safety Commission, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Food and Drug Administration have limited authority to regulate manufacturers who add toxic ingredients to their products.

"I think that most people's perception is that somewhere, someone is testing all the products," says Whelan.<sup>5</sup> But, they're not.

This lack of oversight allows manufacturers of baby-care, household and personal-care products – with the support of powerful and well-funded trade associations – to add thousands of toxic chemicals to products you use every day. Whelan states:

*"The American Chemistry Council is the most powerful trade association anywhere, and it spends hundreds of millions of dollars to influence public opinion, fund political campaigns and underwrite aggressive lobbying efforts.*

*Their goal is to avoid regulation that would impact profits of the largest chemical companies in the world, such as BASF, ConAgra Foods, Dow, DuPont, General Mills, Monsanto, Nestle, Pepsico and Unilever."*

Due to the tremendous amount of chemicals coming at you from multiple sources, some of the fragrances that you are exposed to daily may be damaging your health and putting you at risk for serious illness.

## **The 'Fragrance Loophole' and Why Should It Concern You**

Jane Houlihan, vice president of research for the Environmental Working Group (EWG), notes that the lack of U.S. government oversight with respect to added chemicals in consumer products is referred to as the "fragrance loophole:"<sup>6</sup>

*"One big loophole in the labeling law is "fragrance." Manufacturers don't have to list their ingredients. So whether you hold a perfume, cologne, shampoo or shaving cream – whatever the product is – normally the fragrance components aren't disclosed.*

*There can literally be a mixture of hundreds of different chemicals hidden in that one ingredient."*

Adds Green Living Expert Alexandra Zissu, "You're eating fragrance, wearing fragrance, washing your hands with fragrance and even blowing your nose with fragrance."<sup>7</sup> Among the undisclosed ingredients are several known or suspected allergens, carcinogens, endocrine disruptors, environmental pollutants, neurotoxic chemicals and respiratory irritants.

Because these toxins are responsible for the spike in chronic diseases from asthma and birth defects to infertility and cancer, "The sooner you get this stuff out of your life, the better," says Zissu.<sup>8</sup>

Worse, due to the lack of product testing and safety measures, the interaction of fragrance chemicals across multiple products cannot be known. No one stops to ask what kind of interaction might take place when chemicals from your body spray interact with your acne cream.

By the way, did you know the average American female uses up to 20 products, and the average male up to 10 products, per day that have hidden ingredients linked to a variety of adverse health issues?<sup>9</sup>

Tests conducted by the EWG revealed the average fragrance product contains at least 14 secret chemicals not listed on the label.<sup>10</sup> This secrecy and lack of transparency make it impossible for you to make an informed choice about the products you buy.

## **Transparency in Labeling Is Needed to Rein in Use of Toxic Chemicals**

Whelan provides common-sense advice for addressing the U.S. system with respect to your everyday products and the handling of fragrance:<sup>11</sup>

*"First, we need to get the chemicals of greatest concern off the market. This is no small task, because powerful industry lobbyists oppose regulating chemicals, even substances that cause cancer, birth defects or disrupt hormones. Updating TSCA so federal agencies have power to regulate toxic chemicals is key.*

*Next, we need full chemical disclosure on labels. If companies had to disclose all chemicals in their products, they'd make better choices about the chemicals they sold and consumers would be empowered to make informed choices about what they bought. Transparency works."*

Jeffrey Hollender, cofounder of Seventh Generation, suggests manufacturers are purposely withholding ingredient lists to protect their interests:<sup>12</sup>

*"The reason most cleaning and personal care products don't list all of the ingredients is because the manufacturer doesn't want you to know what's in there. They're scared of consumers learning that they're purchasing a product that has a toxic or carcinogenic ingredient. They're trying to avoid the consumer backlash that would come if they were transparent."*

## **US Versus European Chemical Regulations**

The U.S. system for handling chemicals with respect to consumer products is broken Hollender, added:<sup>13</sup>

*"The question is how many people have to die? How many people have to get sick before the proof becomes overwhelming and inescapable? What we need is a precautionary approach. You must prove the product's safe. You must prove the chemical's safe. And until that's proven, the product should not be allowed in the store, and the chemical should not be allowed in the product."*

Whelan agrees and suggests America could learn something from Europe, where tougher standards are in place to protect human health:<sup>14</sup>

*"The big philosophical difference between how products and chemicals are regulated in Europe versus the U.S. is interesting. In Europe, chemicals are guilty until proven innocent. The precautionary principle says that if we suspect something may be harmful, well then let's not use it. They use common sense. In the U.S., it's the exact opposite. Chemicals are innocent until proven guilty, yet it's virtually impossible to prove guilt."*

According to the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics,<sup>15</sup> the European Union Cosmetics Directive, which was adopted in January 2003 and revised in 2013, bans 1,328 chemicals from cosmetics that are known or suspected to cause birth defects, cancer, genetic mutation or reproductive harm. To date, the FDA has banned only 11 chemicals from cosmetics in the U.S.

## **Why Is the Fragrance Industry Against Safety Regulations?**

Like the secret formula for Coca-Cola and Colonel Sander's secret recipe for Kentucky Fried Chicken, the fragrance industry has been guarding its carefully kept secrets for decades. As such, a certain air of mystery has resulted. Says fragrance consultant Steve Herman:<sup>16</sup>

*"The perfume industry has been trying to maintain a certain mystique, because fragrance has an allure of mystery, romance and creativity about it. If we transform it into a chemical company with ingredient disclosure – all of that mystique would be gone."*

Whelan suggests the huge number of chemicals needing to be tested is very likely the most discouraging factor related to safeguarding consumer products:<sup>17</sup>

*"There are over 80,000 chemicals in use today. While most of them are probably safe, it takes time and money to test them. Industry doesn't want to know which*

*are harmful because it would mean reformulating many of their products, which would require additional money.*

*Furthermore, by disclosing chemicals on the label, particularly if one is a potential carcinogen, companies could be liable, which they also do not want. Industry wants it both ways. They don't want chemicals proven safe, and they don't want consumers to have full disclosure."*

Because the U.S. federal government has traditionally taken a passive role in terms of regulating the addition of chemicals in consumer products, individual states, such as California, have taken action on their own. California's well known Proposition 65, or Prop 65,<sup>18</sup> was enacted in 1986. Eleanne van Vliet, director of toxic chemical research for As You Sow, sees value in state-enacted regulations:<sup>19</sup>

*"Prop 65 prohibits businesses from knowingly exposing consumers to chemicals known to cause cancer or birth defects. Companies have to either reformulate the product to use less toxic ingredients or remove the product from the market completely."*

## **EWG Helps You Identify Toxic Ingredients You Should Avoid**

Judi Shils, executive director of Teens Turning Green, underscores the importance of taking an active role in evaluating the personal-care products you use every day.<sup>20</sup>

"Shampoo, conditioner, deodorant, toothpaste, moisturizer, hand sanitizer — each one of those products has about 15 synthetic chemicals in it, so your body's burden is enormous. You're just dumping all this toxic stuff into your bloodstream!"

To help you identify harmful ingredients and make buying choices that support your health and well-being, the EWG provided the following list of toxins to AVOID in personal-care products manufactured for the U.S. market:<sup>21</sup>

### **For your body:**

- Fragrance

- Retinyl palmitate or other retinoids in daytime skin products
- Triclocarban in bar soap
- Triclosan in liquid soap (banned in 2016 by the FDA)

### **For your hair:**

- DMDM hydantoin
- Fragrance
- Parabens – propyl, isopropyl, butyl and isobutyl
- PEG, cetareth and polyethylene

### **For your nails:**

- Dibutyl phthalate (DBP)
- Formaldehyde or formalin
- Toluene

If you want to go further in your exploration of potentially harmful ingredients, check out EWG's Skin Deep® database,<sup>22</sup> where you can research the personal care products you use and identify less toxic options. EWG also maintains a Guide to Healthy Cleaning,<sup>23</sup> which informs you about safe alternatives for household-cleaning products.

## **Nontoxic Fragrances Are Available**

Avoiding toxic fragrance does not mean that you must forgo all pleasant scents in your home or personal-care products, because truly natural options are available. Organic essential oils are one option, and you can even add them to your own non-fragranced products, such as facial moisturizers or hand lotion. Organic essential oils and isolates come from botanical ingredients such as bark, flowers, fruits, leaves, seeds, wood and other 100% natural raw materials.



Though they may cost more, and the scent may last only a couple of hours after each application, organic essential oils won't pose the health risks of synthetic fragrances. (It's still possible to have sensitivities to natural scents so take care with them around individuals who may not be able to tolerate them.)

Of course, you have the option of avoiding fragrance entirely. In fact, a woman's natural scent has been found to be more seductive than perfume,<sup>24</sup> scoring another point for the power of nature!

## **LCSA Law Implemented, EPA Finally Empowered to Review Chemicals**

In June, 2016, U.S. Congress overwhelmingly passed the Frank R. Lautenberg Chemical Safety for the 21st Century Act (LCSA) to reform TSCA. Although the changes will likely be slow, LCSA introduces improvements such as:<sup>25</sup>

- Mandating the EPA to evaluate existing chemicals under enforceable deadlines
- Requiring all chemicals used in commerce to undergo risk-based reviews
- Providing increased public transparency with respect to chemicals
- Funding the EPA consistently so it can carry out its responsibilities under the law

On the downside, the LCSA makes it more difficult for states to regulate chemicals once the EPA has evaluated them, and prohibits states from taking action against any chemical the EPA has declared "high priority" for EPA investigation. Once the EPA declares a chemical safe for a specific use or condition, states are permanently preempted from taking any action against it.<sup>26</sup>

In December 2016, the EPA announced the first 10 chemicals it will review under LCSA, as highlighted by the EWG:<sup>27</sup> 1,4-dioxane, 1-bromopropane, asbestos, carbon tetrachloride, HBCD (cyclic aliphatic bromide cluster), methylene chloride, NMP (N-methylpyrrolidone), PERC (tetrachloroethylene), pigment violet 29 and TCE (trichloroethylene). Several of the 10 are suspected to be possible human carcinogens.

While you may think asbestos was banned many years ago, the U.S. still imports, uses and sells asbestos and asbestos products for use in automotive, flooring and roofing products, even though inhalation or ingestion of asbestos fibers is known to cause lung cancer. Clearly, the EPA has a lot more work to do to safeguard your health and mine.

## **What You Can Do to Help Close the 'Fragrance Loophole'**

Based on feedback from consumers like you, and the diligence of consumer-advocacy organizations like EWG, manufacturers and retailers are beginning to realize the need for change. U.S.-based companies such as Procter & Gamble (P&G),<sup>28</sup> S.C. Johnson<sup>29</sup> and Unilever,<sup>30</sup> as well as retailers like Target<sup>31</sup> have taken steps to become more transparent with ingredient lists.

Some steps are small, such as P&G's move to provide two lists on its website<sup>32</sup> of fragrance chemicals the company is currently using, and those no longer in use in any of its brands. While that sounds positive, P&G still has access to more than 2,800 other fragrance chemicals that would not have to be disclosed on product labels.

Other steps are bigger, such as Target's decision<sup>33</sup> to require full ingredient disclosure by 2020 for all baby care, household and personal care products, as well as a ban on formaldehyde, parabens and phthalates in those products. Furthermore, by 2022, Target wants to remove flame retardants and perfluorinated chemicals from all its textiles.

If you want to go to the next level with respect to taking a stand against the continued use and abuse of fragrance in consumer products, below are some tips on how you can get started:<sup>34</sup>

**Choose products that disclose a complete list of ingredients**

---

**Select "fragrance free" products instead of "unscented" ones because unscented products may use fragrance to mask odors**

---

---

Be wary of "greenwashing" related to the use of terms such as "natural" or "organic" for personal care products because they are unregulated and can be used regardless of product contents

---

Research the product's ingredients prior to purchase by perusing the EWG's Skin Deep database and/or other sources<sup>35</sup>

---

Opt for products using organic essential oils instead of synthetic scents

---

Educate your children and make them aware of safer choices for the products they use daily

---

Ask the company for specific details about the products you like and find out if they are safe

---

Vote with your dollars and stop buying products that you know are unsafe

---

Demand action by telling manufacturers and retailers, as well as your state and federal legislators, that you support the full disclosure of ingredients for household and personal-care products and want safer alternatives

---

## Sources and References

---

- 1, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 16, 19, 20 [Stink! 2015](#)
- 2 [The New York Times November 26, 2015](#)
- 3 [International Fragrance Association, Ingredients](#)
- 5, 11, 14, 17 [Purely Green Environmental LLC](#)
- 10 [EWG May 12, 2010](#)
- 15 [Snails Safe Nails. European vs. US and Canada Cosmetics: A World Apart. February 11, 2019](#)
- 18 [California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, Proposition 65](#)
- 21 [EWG October 14, 2016](#)
- 22, 35 [EWG, Skin Deep® Database](#)
- 23 [EWG, Guide to Healthy Cleaning](#)
- 24 [Psychological Science, December 22, 2009; 21\(2\): 276-283](#)
- 25 [Environmental Protection Agency, The Frank R. Lautenberg Chemical Safety for the 21st Century Act](#)
- 26 [Safer Chemicals, Abbreviated Guide to the Frank R. Lautenberg Chemical Safety For the 21st Century Act](#)

- <sup>27</sup> EWG December 7, 2016
- <sup>28</sup> EWG February 29, 2016
- <sup>29</sup> EWG February 16, 2016
- <sup>30</sup> EWG February 7, 2017
- <sup>31</sup> EWG January 25, 2017
- <sup>32</sup> P&G, Product Fragrances & Scents
- <sup>33</sup> Chemical & Engineering News January 30, 2017
- <sup>34</sup> UCLA College of Social Sciences