

## Pretty in Pink?

Companies now market makeup to girls as young as 3—and the health implications are huge.

BY STACY MALKAN

*Lipstick, eyeliner, mascara, perfume*—Jessica Assaf applied them all, and more, before she hit 12. And by her mid teens, she estimates she was using 15 to 20 beauty products a day. Like many girls, Assaf was indoctrinated into the beauty culture at a young age, with makeover-themed birthday parties as early as kindergarten and trips to the nail salon starting in grade school.

“I remember the coolest thing growing up was Hard Candy nail polish with the ring on the bottle. I really wanted that ring,” Assaf says. “The companies do a really good job of trying to attract younger girls.”

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# The Truth

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Indeed. Consider the Hannah Montana Backstage Makeover Set, targeting 3- to 7-year-olds; Barbie Makeup games; and spa services with names like “Twinkle Toes and Fancy Fingers” that offer manicures and facials to girls from age 6 to 11. Popular hair-straightening products called “Just For Me!” feature 7-year-old girls on the box. Getting your hair colored is now practically a rite of passage in middle school.

“Five years ago, the rule of thumb was 15- to 16-year-olds would come in for their first color. Now, that girl is 10,” Gordon Miller, a spokesman for the National Cosmetology Association, told *The New York Times*. The trend, he said, represents a “lucrative niche market” for the beauty industry.

### Early puberty not so pretty

But this rush to cosmetic beauty also represents something else—increased exposure to toxic chemicals. Many scientists now suspect that these toxins, found in many of the cosmetics for which young girls clamor, contribute to another disturbing trend: Research shows that girls in the US, especially African-American girls, are entering puberty earlier than their grandmothers did. In fact, half of all American girls

now show signs of breast development by the age of 10—one to two years earlier than 40 years ago—and a significant number show signs as early as age 8 or 9.

Breast development begins a series of dramatic physical and mental changes that lead to sexual maturity. While the physical changes are well-noted—especially by fellow classmates—the significant changes that take place within the brain during puberty often go unremarked. The brain, for example, in order to accommodate new powers of abstract thinking and adult socialization behaviors, becomes less flexible. But as that happens, it becomes harder to learn complex skills such as playing a musical instrument, speaking a foreign language, or mastering a sport.

“Girls now have, on average, a year and a half less to learn these things,” says Sandra Steingraber, PhD, biologist and author of a paper that discusses the research on puberty. “Over the course of just a few decades, the childhoods of US girls have been significantly shortened. This has huge implications.”

And the implications extend far beyond learning skills. Girls who

## Teens Going Green

In an effort to do right by their bodies and the environment, Teens for Safe Cosmetics created *The Teen Green Girl Guide* ([teensforsafecosmetics.org](http://teensforsafecosmetics.org)). Filled with tips, resources, and challenges, the guide documents a day in the life of a girl turning green.

The following are a few of our favorites:

**Lather, rinse, but forget about repeating:** Shampooing a couple times a week is usually plenty. Save water, save the waste generated by shampoo bottles, and save your body from being exposed to unnecessary chemicals. Also switch to greener personal care products.

**Make a case study of one product,** from hand sanitizer to pool cleaner, that you find in your school and that might be compromising your health. Research the product's ingredients and health impact. Figure out a greener alternative, and talk to your teachers and staff about how to make the change.

The Teens for Safe Cosmetics group has also brought together like-minded companies to create a new product line for teens—Teens Turning Green, which is sold exclusively at Whole Foods stores beginning this month. The eight products in the line have achieved the Whole Foods Premium Body Care Seal, a strict standard for safety, and also rank tops among teens for product performance. Check out the products by Alafia, Astara, Benedetta, E.O., Pomega-5, Depth, and Terra formulated especially for typical teen skin issues.





enter puberty earlier are at higher risk for breast cancer and depression, and are more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors such as drinking or unprotected sex. The situation has many parents wondering what, if anything, they can do to slow the onset of puberty.

### Dangerous beauty for girls

One answer, says Steingraber, may be found in the chemical-laden products girls use to look more grown-up.

Take Assaf's old beauty routine. According to an analysis from the Environmental Working Group's Skin Deep database (cosmeticsdatabase.com), the 15 products in her daily routine—from shampoo and deodorant to hair spray, lotion, and makeup—contained more than 100 chemical ingredients, many of them toxic. Her daily dose included several carcinogens and more than two dozen hormone-disrupting chemicals, such as parabens (a common preservative) and phthalates (often found in fragrance).

While cosmetic manufacturers argue that each product contains only a small amount of any given toxic chemical, chronic exposure from multiple products—especially during sensitive developmental years—has scientists concerned. “We have to worry about the windows of exposure: exposures when mom is pregnant, when baby is born, in early childhood, and throughout puberty,”

says Maryann Donovan, PhD, MPH, science director at the Center of Environmental Oncology at the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute.

Donovan, who is particularly concerned about products marketed to African-Americans such as hair pomades that may contain hormone disrupters, worries that these ingredients may contribute to early puberty and high rates of breast cancer among young African-Americans. “For adolescents and young children, it's really important to minimize exposure to these chemicals,” she says, because so much development is happening up until they're 18 or 19 years old.

### Turning back the clock

Exposure to a plethora of chemicals is just one facet of modern living linked to early puberty in girls. The research also points to low birth weight, obesity, physical inactivity, television viewing, and other factors that are, to some extent, within our control.

Biologist Steingraber says we also need to adopt strict policies that eliminate harmful chemicals from skincare and other products. “I believe there is enough evidence to support banning any chemical known in the lab to advance sexual maturation, and to which humans are exposed.”

Learning about the toxic chemicals in her beauty routine inspired Assaf to just that kind of activism.

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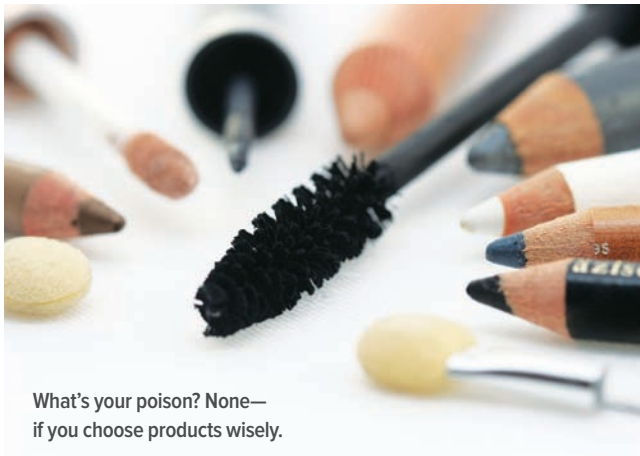
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For the past year, Assaf has served as president of the Teens for Safe Cosmetics, a group of teens who are organizing nationally to shift the beauty industry toward using safer ingredients.

"Cosmetics should be safe, not toxic," says Assaf, now 18 and heading to college in the fall. "There's no reason for cosmetics to contain carcinogens and other hazardous chemicals." To that end, the teens have been educating their peers, lobbying the government for policies that eliminate



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harmful chemicals, and working with companies to improve products. In fact, the Congress recently approved a ban on the use of phthalates in children's products.

This fall, in partnership with Whole Foods, the teens will launch Teens Turning Green—a new product line created by several manufacturers that meet the Whole Foods Premium Body Care standard, meaning their products can't contain parabens, phthalates, or more than 200 other problematic chemicals.

For Assaf, the issue of early puberty has personal ramifications. She has noticed her 10-year-old sister's friends already starting to develop. "When I was in third and fourth grade, no one had breasts," says Assaf. "I remember puberty being a sixth- or seventh-grade thing. Now the girls seem to be growing up so much sooner."

She goes on to say, "It's scary because the effect of these chemicals on the human body is not just something I read about—it's something I see happening. And it's frustrating. We can't just keep talking about this and keep searching for proof. We need to make changes now."

Even small actions, such as investigating the products on the bathroom sink, can lead to more profound changes down the road, as Assaf found when she became involved in the safe-cosmetics campaign. "It changed how I look at the world," she says. "I used to put all my trust in companies. Now I've learned to think for myself." ■

STACY MALKAN is the author of *Not Just a Pretty Face: The Ugly Side of the Beauty Industry* (New Society, 2007) and a cofounder of the national Campaign for Safe Cosmetics. For more information, visit [notjustaprettyface.org](http://notjustaprettyface.org)