

ICCR Consumer Communication Joint Working Group

The International Cooperation on Cosmetics Regulation (ICCR) is a voluntary international group of cosmetics regulatory authorities from Brazil, Canada, Chinese Taipei, the European Union, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States who meet on an annual basis to discuss cosmetics safety and regulation as well as enter into a constructive dialogue with relevant cosmetics industry trade associations.

ICCR works on different topics of common interest and relevance to the cosmetics sector. Examples of past and present topics include allergens, alternatives to animal testing, integrated strategies for safety assessments, nanotechnology/nanomaterials, trace elements, preservatives, and more.

This Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document provides consumers with some general insights that reflect common questions from around the world that consumers frequently have regarding specific concerns related to cosmetics. The information presented in this FAQ reflects perspectives developed in collaboration with both ICCR regulators and industry. This FAQ is intended for consumers who may be looking for more information on allergens in cosmetics.

Frequently Asked Questions – Allergens in Cosmetics

What is an allergen?

An **allergen** is any substance that causes an allergic reaction. An **allergic reaction** happens when a person's immune system reacts to substances that are harmless to most people.

- Many substances, natural or human-made, can be allergens.
- Different people can be allergic to different things and most people do not have allergies at all.
- You can develop an allergy at any age, even to substances you have not reacted to before.
- Many people are aware of the specific allergens that give them an allergic reaction; others may need specific testing to find out what substances are causing their allergic reactions.
- Allergic reactions range in type and severity from localized skin reactions, which are most common for cosmetics, to more severe and potentially life-threatening reactions affecting other areas of the body.

Do cosmetics contain allergens?

Cosmetics may contain ingredients that are allergens for some people. This does not mean that the cosmetic is not safe for others to use. It simply means that those with known allergies to these ingredients should avoid using products that contain them. Cosmetic ingredients that are most often associated with allergies are those found in fragrances or hair dyes, or used as preservatives.

Cosmetic companies are responsible for ensuring that their products are safe before they are sold to consumers. Regulators also play a role by setting safety requirements, and monitoring and enforcing compliance.

How do I know if I might be having an allergic reaction to a cosmetic?

Allergic reactions to cosmetics most often appear as red, itchy rashes on the skin – also known as ***allergic contact dermatitis***. These reactions typically happen on or near areas of the body where the cosmetic was applied. Symptoms can vary, but may include:

- itchy, flaking, or peeling skin
- a rash
- hives
- facial swelling
- irritation of the eyes, nose and mouth

In some cases, symptoms may appear beyond the site of application of the product, particularly on areas of the body that have come into contact with the product.

Any of these symptoms may be a sign that you are having an allergic reaction.

Although skin reactions are most common, some cosmetic ingredients can also affect the respiratory system when they are inhaled. This is especially true for people with underlying respiratory conditions such as asthma, allergic rhinitis, or respiratory infections.

Some people are allergic to certain fragrances and breathing them in can cause coughing, phlegm, a runny/stuffy nose, and/or headache, but can also include more serious symptoms such as shortness of breath, chest tightness and/or wheezing.

In very rare cases, a severe allergic reaction called **anaphylaxis** may occur. Symptoms of anaphylaxis can include shortness of breath, trouble swallowing, light-headedness, chest pain, a rapid, weak pulse, nausea, vomiting, and/or loss of consciousness.

What should I do if I think I might be having an allergic reaction to a cosmetic?

If you think you may be having an allergic reaction to a cosmetic:

1. **Stop using the product immediately.**

Remove the product as soon as the first symptoms appear, using

- water,
- soap and water, or
- another cleaning material suggested by the label.

2. **Seek medical attention.**

Allergic reactions can become more severe over time. Be sure to talk to a medical professional about what product or particular substance might be triggering your reaction. If possible, bring the product with you. Your medical professional may be able to recommend tests to determine the specific cause and may recommend treatment for your symptoms.

In rare cases, allergic reactions may be more serious and can even be life threatening. If you think you are having a severe allergic reaction, seek immediate medical attention.

3. **Contact the company.**

You are encouraged to use the contact information on the product label to report reactions to the cosmetic company. The company can provide additional information that may help you and the medical professionals caring for you determine the cause of your reaction and how best to treat it.

4. **Where applicable, report to the health authority in your area.**

Depending on where you live, your health authority may want to hear from you directly if you have had a reaction to a cosmetic.

How can I protect myself from allergic reactions to cosmetics?

The best way to prevent an allergic reaction is to know what you are allergic to and how to avoid it. Here are some helpful tips for avoiding allergic reactions to cosmetics:

- **Read the list of ingredients on the product labels.**
 - Ingredients are listed on cosmetic labels to help you make informed choices.
 - Avoid any ingredients you know or think you may be allergic to.
 - Be aware that terms such as “fragrance”, “parfum”, “aroma”, or “flavour” may be used on cosmetic labels to represent a mixture of substances. Some of these substances could be allergens for some people. You may wish to contact the manufacturer for more information on these ingredients.
 - Cosmetic labels may use terms that are not globally standardized, such as “hypoallergenic”, “dermatologist tested”, “for sensitive skin”, “fragrance-free”, “preservative-free”, and others. Be aware that these products may still contain ingredients that are allergens for some people.
- **Follow the product directions.**
 - Carefully read and follow the directions for safe use of the product. Certain products (e.g., hair dyes) include instructions for you to test a small amount of product on your skin before applying it more broadly. Always follow these directions to check for any reactions before using the product.

Cosmetic safety is a shared responsibility.

- **Regulators** are responsible for setting safety requirements, monitoring and enforcing compliance, and communicating health and safety information to consumers.
- **Cosmetic companies** are responsible for evaluating the safety of their cosmetics to be sure that they are safe for their intended use and for complying with regulatory requirements.
- **Consumers** have a role to play in maintaining and protecting their own health and safety by making informed choices about the products they buy, by following the directions for safe use of the product, and reporting reactions to cosmetic companies and health authorities, where applicable.