

IS THE GOVERNMENT DOING ENOUGH TO KEEP COSMETICS SAFE?

Why activists are urging Ottawa to clean up its act

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In the Beaux-Arts Wellington Building steps from Parliament Hill, a group of mostly women from across Canada clink glasses and glad-hand with MPs and political staffers, but this isn't your usual squad of slick lobbyists. The telltale clue: More than a few are sporting the same matchy-matchy red-orange hue—in colour-coordinated jumpsuits, dresses and swipes of bold lipstick.

It's the signature shade for **Beautycounter**, a clean-beauty brand with a mission statement more ambitious than most. When not wooing shoppers with its nearly 130 skincare and makeup products, the six-year-old California-based company is making an entirely different kind of sales pitch: lobbying lawmakers across the U.S. and Canada to transform the cosmetics industry by toughening up regulations on **risky or iffy ingredients**.

Last spring, the brand took to Washington, D.C., lobbying on Capitol Hill with a team of 100 consultants (that's Beautycounter-speak for its independent direct salespeople). And in early May, the company rallied 25 of its top sellers in Canada to bring its message to Parliament Hill for the first time. Its goal: to convince MPs that it's time to reform the sprawling Canadian Environmental Protection Act (CEPA), which includes rules on toxic substances—and thus affects what ingredients can't be in your moisturizer.

"It's not enough for a company like Beautycounter to put safer products into the marketplace. We want to fundamentally change our laws, so regardless of who you are, how much money you make or where you live, you can walk into a store and know the products are safe," explains Lindsay Dahl, the company's SVP of social mission, when we meet in Ottawa.

Right now, the cosmetics aisle can be confusing, even for the conscious consumer. Take the buzzy term "clean beauty": It signals that a product is free of sketchy stuff—most commonly, this includes ingredients like parabens, phthalates or sulphates. But since the claim isn't regulated, "clean beauty" can also mean whatever a company spins it to mean. Plus, what's legally allowed in your products depends on where you live: The E.U. has banned or restricted more than 1,400 ingredients in cosmetics, while the U.S. has done the same for merely 30. Here in Canada, our **Cosmetic Ingredient Hotlist** prohibits or restricts just over 600 ingredients. (For its own products, Beautycounter has a "Never List" of 1,500 ingredients—everything banned or restricted in the E.U., plus about 100 additional ingredients it considers concerning.)

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While Health Canada's ingredient blacklist is lengthier than its American counterpart, our cosmetics regulations still don't go far enough, says Muhannad Malas, program manager of toxics at Environmental Defence, Beautycounter's on-the-ground non-profit partner in Canada. "The [Cosmetic Ingredient] Hotlist is basically an administrative list—it's not a legally binding list," explains Malas.

"Health Canada communicates to companies that these are the chemicals that are banned or restricted, but what we've often seen is that Health Canada doesn't have the regulatory powers and authority to enforce some of these bans," Malas adds. "That's been problematic because we've often seen products containing things that shouldn't be in those products—according to the Hotlist—or [restricted ingredients] at a concentration higher than Health Canada deems 'legal.'"

When reached for comment, Health Canada spokesperson Geoffroy Legault-Thivierge wrote in an emailed statement, "All cosmetics sold in Canada must be safe to use and must meet the requirements of the Food and Drugs Act (FDA) and the Cosmetic Regulations (CR)."

He notes that Health Canada does conduct compliance and enforcement projects yearly to review cosmetics and routinely takes action against products with prohibited or restricted ingredients. For example, from 2017 to 2018, chemical testing was done on 206 products to check for verboten fragrance ingredients. This resulted in issuing "stop sales" for two rule-breaking products.

Even so, Beautycounter's political activists want to see more being done, so unsafe products don't get onto shelves in the first place. They're urging lawmakers to make Health Canada's Hotlist "legally enforceable"; to ban all phthalates from cosmetics (currently only one type, DEHP, is on the Hotlist); to close the so-called "fragrance loophole" (companies don't have to disclose perfume ingredients, considered a trade secret); and to better enforce limits on heavy metals in makeup (no one adds lead to lipstick on purpose, but contaminants can be in the soil where minerals are sourced).

Dahl admits that getting changes made in government policy can be a "glacial" process, but she also notes that in Canada, voicing concerns to your **Member of Parliament** is much easier than most people assume: Yes, you can just call and ask for a meeting. Until the law is revamped, it'll be up to companies—and consumers voting with their wallets—to push the clean-beauty movement forward.