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FEATURE ARTICLE

Beauty or Betrayal? Decoding the Safety of Cosmetics in Fiji

The promise of beauty is a powerful allure. From the humble moisturiser that starts our day to the transformative hair treatment at a local salon, cosmetics are woven into the fabric of modern Fijian life. We use them to express ourselves, to boost our confidence, and to care for our appearance. But in a market flooded with choices from international giants to online-only sensations a critical question lingers beneath the surface of every lotion, lipstick, and lash serum: Is this product safe?

Recent consumer complaints paint a concerning picture. Reports of allergic reactions, scalp burns from hair straightening treatments, and mysterious rashes from new skincare products are not isolated incidents. They are symptoms of a larger issue: the infiltration of sub-standard, unregulated, and sometimes dangerous cosmetic products into the Fijian market.

This feature article serves as a comprehensive guide, moving beyond surface-level concerns to explore the science of safety and the practical steps every consumer can take to ensure that their quest for beauty doesn't come at the cost of their health.

The Silent Threat: How Unsafe Cosmetics Harm Your Health

The skin is not an impermeable barrier. It is a living, breathing organ. The U.S. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health explains that chemicals can penetrate this barrier through a process called dermal absorption, entering the bloodstream and potentially affecting internal organs. This is why what you put *on* your skin can end up *in* your body.

The harm from unsafe cosmetics can be immediate or insidious.

- **Acute Reactions:** Contact dermatitis characterised by redness, itching, swelling, and blisters is a common immediate reaction to an irritant or allergen. This can be triggered by anything from a preservative in a face cream to a harsh chemical in a hair dye.
- **Systemic Toxicity:** This is the long-term, internal damage caused by the accumulation of toxic substances. Repeated exposure to products containing heavy metals like lead

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or neurotoxins like mercury can lead to kidney damage, neurological issues, and hormonal disruption.

A Closer Look at the Culprits: Ingredients to Avoid

Understanding ingredient labels is the most powerful tool a consumer has. Here are some key substances that should raise immediate red flags:

1. Mercury and Hydroquinone: Despite being banned in Fiji, these substances still appear in illegal skin-lightening creams. The World Health Organization (WHO) warns that mercury is a potent neurotoxin that can cause kidney damage, skin rashes, and permanent neurological harm. Hydroquinone, often used as a skin bleach, can cause a disfiguring condition called ochronosis, where the skin becomes thick, dark, and blotchy. **Any product making dramatic skin-whitening claims should be viewed with extreme suspicion.**

2. Potent Topical Steroids: Sometimes hidden in "miracle" creams for acne or eczema, these can provide short-term relief but lead to long-term disaster. The American Academy of Dermatology warns that unsupervised use can cause Topical Steroid Withdrawal (TSW), a painful condition with severe redness, burning, and skin thinning.

3. Formaldehyde-Releasers: Often found in nail hardeners, keratin hair treatments, and some preservative systems, formaldehyde is classified as a known human carcinogen by the International Agency for Research on Cancer. When heated during a hair straightening treatment, it releases a toxic gas that can cause severe respiratory distress and eye irritation for both the client and the salon worker.

Decoding the Package: What You Should See

Fiji's labelling requirements are designed for transparency. A compliant product's packaging must be a source of truth for the consumer. Before you buy, look for these essential elements:

- **Product Name and Brand:** Clearly stated.
- **Full List of Ingredients (INCI):** Ingredients must be listed in descending order of concentration, using standard International Nomenclature of Cosmetic Ingredients (INCI) names. This allows you to spot potential allergens or harmful chemicals.

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- **Net Content:** The weight or volume of the product.
- **Manufacturer's Details:** Name and address of the manufacturer.
- **Country of Origin:** Where the product was made.
- **Batch Number:** A unique code that allows the product to be traced in case of a recall. The absence of a batch number is a major red flag.
- **Expiry Date or Period After Opening (PAO) Symbol:** A date or a symbol (like an open jar with "12M") indicating how long the product is safe to use after opening.
- **Warnings and Precautions:** Any necessary safety information, such as "do not use on broken skin" or "keep away from eyes."

If a product lacks this information, or if the packaging has spelling errors, blurry logos, or looks tampered with, it is very likely a counterfeit or illegally imported product.

The Trap of Misleading Claims

"If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is." This adage applies perfectly to cosmetic advertising. Be wary of claims that are miraculous, clinical, or scientifically improbable. Phrases like "miracle cure," "dramatically erases wrinkles in days," or "permanently lightens skin" are classic red flags.

Cosmetics can only affect the appearance of the skin; they cannot change its structure or function permanently. A legitimate product will make realistic claims about moisturising, smoothing, or improving the appearance of skin. A product promising a medical outcome is acting as an unlicensed drug.

Counterfeit Cosmetics: Illegal Under Fiji Law

Many unsafe cosmetic products circulating in the market are not simply poor quality they may be counterfeit. These products imitate well-known brands but are often manufactured without proper safety standards, quality control, or approved ingredients. In Fiji, dealing in counterfeit goods is a criminal offence. Under the *Merchandise Marks Act 1933 (Fiji)*, particularly *Section 3*, it is unlawful to forge a trademark, falsely apply a trademark to goods, or sell or import goods bearing a forged trademark or false trade description. Individuals involved in such activities may face prosecution, fines, imprisonment, and the forfeiture of the counterfeit goods. In addition, the *Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission Act 2010* prohibit

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businesses from misleading consumers. *Sections 75 and 77* make it unlawful for traders to engage in misleading conduct or make false representations about goods, including their authenticity or origin. Counterfeit products may also be stopped at the border under the *Customs (Prohibited Imports and Exports) Regulations 1986*, where *Regulation 7 together with Schedule 5* prohibits the importation of goods bearing forged trademarks or false trade descriptions. These legal safeguards exist to prevent deceptive practices and to protect consumers from unsafe products entering the Fijian market

Practical Tips for the Vigilant Consumer

Protecting yourself is an active process. Here are actionable steps you can take:

1. **Become a Label Reader:** Make it a habit to scan the ingredient list. If you don't recognise the ingredients, or if the list is missing, do not buy it.
2. **Shop Smart:** Purchase cosmetics from reputable pharmacies, authorised retailers, and established department stores. Be extremely cautious when buying from social media marketplaces, street vendors, or unverified online shops.
3. **Question the Salon:** Before a treatment, ask your stylist about the products they use. Are they from a reputable brand? Can they show you the packaging? A professional salon should be transparent about the chemicals they are applying to your hair and scalp.
4. **Price as a Signal:** If the price of a high-end brand is suspiciously low, it is almost certainly a counterfeit. The cost of authentic ingredients and safety testing is reflected in the price.
5. **Patch Test:** Always perform a patch test before using a new product, especially hair dyes and potent serums. Apply a small amount to your inner arm and wait 24-48 hours to see if a reaction occurs.

Recognizing a Reaction

An allergic reaction may not always occur immediately. Symptoms can appear within minutes, hours, or even days after application. A case lodged at the Council in 2024 highlighted the experience of one consumer who purchased a particular brand of lipstick and experienced severe irritation and 'burning' sensation after weeks of using the product. It was later discovered that the product contained ingredients which she had been allergic to. This case

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Mobile App

exemplifies the importance of properly reading ingredient labels when purchasing cosmetics, as the stakes are high.

There are common warning signs which include:

- Burning sensation
- Itching
- Swelling of lips or eyelids
- Blisters
- Crusting or oozing skin

Your Voice Matters: Reporting Channels

Your vigilance doesn't end with your own safety. By reporting issues, you help protect the entire community. If you experience an adverse reaction, or if you suspect a product is non-compliant or counterfeit, you have powerful channels to report it to the Consumer Council of Fiji: As the country's leading consumer advocacy group, the Council investigates complaints, issues public advisories, and advocates for stronger protections.

The beauty industry should enhance your life, not endanger it. By staying informed, demanding transparency, and reporting concerns, Fijian consumers can drive unsafe products out of the market. Remember, true beauty is not just about how you look on the outside; it is about the health and well-being that radiates from within. Choose products that honour both.

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