



Body Chemistry

The demand for safe and body-friendly products is sweeping the adult retail industry. In this issue's cover feature, we examine the questionable materials and ingredients used in adult products, investigate their health risks and offer possible healthy alternatives for your store's inventory.



Of all the variables we encounter in one another, few things are as universally understood to define our adult lives as responsibility. But as retailers and manufacturers of all the finer things adult, being responsible doesn't simply mean making sure price tags are accurate and packaging is friendly. It means offering the safest products for the right purpose to the right people, and knowing how to recommend, explain and educate the consumer. Considering the tremendous response we've received at ASB for this feature on safety, this is a role the entire industry has stepped into with vigor. Responsible retail is a matter of pride as much as it is profit.

That said, the chemical composition of various lubricants, novelties and condoms matters more than that of your average consumer goods. The intimate use and nature of adult products demands that they be safer, non-leaching, non-porous, hypoallergenic, latex-free (and the list goes on and on) in ways that most products from the bath and beauty or electronics section need not be. Sony doesn't manufacture a remote control expecting someone to get good and freaky with it (although those Playstation controllers do vibrate ...), but the use of a vibrator is fairly obvious. It's going to be put, repeatedly, in very sensitive areas, and thus demands a much higher standard of quality and safety.

The focus here is to further clarify and examine many of the products and chemicals used in this industry. The list of potential "bad guys" is fairly long, but easily avoidable (we say "potential" in the same way police reports use "alleged"; until the convictions are handed out, these suspects are not permanently condemned, but it wouldn't hurt to start reading ingredient labels more thoroughly). Not all chemicals

and products need to be avoided either, but as retailers, you need to be ready to ask the right questions of consumers, and ensure that the products they are using are right for their bodies. Allergies, sensitivities and sexual proclivities all factor into making sure that consumers are being sold the best product for them.

It is important to note that the following information is not a definitive resource, but rather a practical guideline for retailers to better serve their consumers.

The Usual Suspects

(1) Phthalates: Chemical compounds of phthalic acid used primarily as plasticizers (substances added to plastics to increase their flexibility)

"The science is still out." It's the mantra we've heard countless times in regards to phthalates. The science is still out. It's impossible to be sure. There haven't been enough studies done.

But ...

One three-letter word has changed this industry. *But*. The science is still out, *but* we're not taking any chances. *But* we want to be proactive. *But* we don't want to add to the potential problem.

The case against — and for — phthalates is a fairly convoluted one, but as far as adult novelty goes, most manufacturers and, subsequently, retailers have made up their minds. Thanks, but no thanks. We'll get our plasticizers elsewhere.

Adult novelty deserves some serious credit. After all, baby bottles are just now seeing the "phthalate-free" stamps on

their packaging; shower curtains are still rife with them; IVs and catheters have yet to see an industry-wide change. Yet you would be hard-pressed to find a vibrator with phthalates in it. Sure, they're still out there, but most manufacturers have gone back to the initial caveat: The science is still out, *but ... we won't risk it.*

While the adult novelty industry has largely phased phthalates out of most toys, several issues arise in the discussion — and knowing the “why” of it explains other health concerns that will be addressed. In the first place, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has given phthalates their seal of approval. (You can head to the website www.phthalates.org for industry insiders' perspectives, as well as a list of factoids “debunking” the problems with phthalates). Consumers are exposed to them everyday anyway, so what does it matter if we get a little exposure with the occasional use of a vibrator? Is the industry overreacting, and how do we convince consumers that this isn't hysteria, or costing them more money as alternative manufacturing options are being pursued?

“The FDA has approved so many things that end up being bad for us that [the FDA's approval of phthalates] is not even an argument I think is valid,” says store owner Ellen Barnard of A Woman's Touch in Madison, Wisconsin. Call her a skeptic, but Barnard has every toy and product in her store tested at an independent lab before putting it on her shelves, and has done so since 2002. “The FDA hasn't studied this completely. They're just now beginning to look at it in children's and baby's toys.”

Skepticism of the FDA aside, the problem with phthalates, according to Dr. George Bittner, PhD of Neurobiology at the University of Texas at Austin, is not simply the possible carcinogenic and reproductive effects commonly blamed on phthalates. The studies behind those, depending on what side of the argument you are on, can be skewed to defend whichever viewpoint one wishes to defend. (Case in point; search Google for “phthalates” and one article after another seem to counter each other.) “The problem is that chemicals like phthalates and parabens (a common preservative) have, as a result of their chemical structure, what is known as estrogenic activity (EA). This means they are capable of binding to mammalian estrogen receptors, including those in humans.”

The chemical structure of your new shower curtain liner is responsible for what we know to be the “smell” of plastics, and we absorb the extra EA into our bodies through direct contact, inhalation or ingestion. “I wouldn't say that a strong smell is a guarantee that a product is dangerous,” cautions Barnard. “But there aren't enough resources to test everything that smells. In my store, the rule of thumb is: if it smells, get rid of it. You, your employees and your customers just



breathe it in all day long when your store reeks like plastic.”

Dr. Bittner explains that men and women alike have certain amounts of naturally occurring estrogen in their bodies. “The idea is that you want to keep it within a certain range that you normally find in the body,” he adds. In other words, allowing the body's natural regulation of estrogen is the ideal in this case. While daily exposure to phthalates is common from cosmetics, food and plastics all around us, Dr. Bittner explains that the intimate use of adult products can allow — but does not guarantee — for these chemicals to be more easily absorbed.

EA, in turn, has been blamed for a host of effects. “These different effects include decreased sperm count, altered ovarian and uterine function, obesity, various sorts of behavioral alterations,” says Bittner. “There have also been fairly well-documented reports that chemicals with EA can increase the probability of producing certain types of cancers.”

Because human genetics are different from person to person, Bittner cautions that “you've got to be careful. (With some other forms (of cancer), the estrogenic activity may decrease the incidence of it.” The bottom line? Estrogen is powerful stuff, and allowing it to be affected by outside sources spells out only a more convoluted list of potential hazards. Without knowing one's exact genetic composition and hormone levels, and how those levels are affected by phthalates in the environment around them, erring on the side of caution seems as if it's become the option of choice for many industry manufacturers and retailers.



Innovation has well out-paced medical concerns, and the alternatives to phthalates in adult novelties are available in droves. While you may not want to display a specific finger in the face of plastic toys that have carried this industry for so long, understanding that there are more body safe options just means your inventory will be as face-forward and varied as possible. The popular alternatives to flesh out a body-friendly selection currently include: *silicone* (perhaps the best bet in terms of comparable feel and softness; the molecules of silicone are extremely large and very hard to absorb into the body), *metal* (which can be great for toying with temperatures), *glass* (one of the more visually dynamic mediums, glass has become a trendy standard, and is among the safest products), *wood*





Vergenza Mk1 metal toys

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(including splinter-free wooden novelties from sustainable exotic hardwoods), *stone* (limited in concept but growing), and *alternative plastics* (including new formulations of PVC).

(2) Parabens: A group of chemicals widely used as preservatives in cosmetic and pharmaceutical industries.

"Parabens are very confounding, because there's a bunch of different kinds," explains Barnard. "They're a delightful little substance and are very versatile."

While Barnard explains that parabens (which are commonly used in lubricants) have been blamed for producing mild estrogenic effects, they are somewhat misunderstood, based largely in part on a study that made its way online. According to Barnard, "The study was poorly done; it used a small number of women; it was never published anywhere except online, and it failed peer-review."

"This study 'discovered' that women who have breast cancer have parabens in their breast tissue. The problem with the study is that they didn't look at women who don't have breast cancer," adds Barnard. "When you test all of us, we all have parabens in our body because we've been exposed to them our entire lives."

While the estrogenic effects of parabens have been proven, the consensus has been that any estrogenic effect caused by the doses of parabens received from consumer products are insignificant compared to natural estrogens and other sources. Translation? Yes, EA is bad. And yes, parabens have been shown to act on estrogen. But compared to



Intimate Organics line of paraben- and glycerine-free products



Purple Amethyst anal beads by Luxotiq

hormone replacement therapy, phthalates or natural levels of bodily estrogen, parabens are reportedly the least of these in terms of EA.

Still, the phenomenon of instant truth that gets attached to anything published online aside, parabens are more commonly known for being an allergen and potentially inciting dermatitis, explains Rebecca Powley from Intimate Organics.

"A lot of customers are drawn to lubes by their price point or flashy packaging," adds Dean Elliot, CEO of Sliquid. "People have to start looking at lube for what's on the inside. There are a lot of people that don't know why a glycerine or paraben-free lubricant is a better choice for them."

(3) Glycerine: A chemical compound that is a colorless, odorless, viscous liquid. A sugar alcohol, it is commonly used in flavored lubricants; improves smoothness and provides lubrication.

Found most commonly in flavored lubricants, glycerine can help make that "Strawberry Lust" flavor as strawberry-ish and lusty as you want. The problem commonly encountered here is that many consumers presume all lubricants are suitable for internal use. Make sure that, when they purchase a flavored lube, and, specifically, one containing glycerine, that they understand it is not meant to be used internally *unless it is of the sugar-free variety*, of which there are many. →



Empowered Products line of paraben- and glycerine-free products



Oceanus Sensuals line of paraben- and glycerine-free products

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"Glycerine is very slippery and pulls moisture from the air," adds Elliot. "That's why it's so commonly used in lubricant. But at 98.6 degrees inside a woman's body, that (chemical) will actually begin to ferment."

What does this mean? While no guarantee, the fermentation process can lead to bacterial growth that results in yeast infections or possible urinary tract infections, explains Elliot.

Unlike the potentially carcinogenic effects of phthalates, educating customers on the safe usage of products containing glycerine can avoid bad press with immediate results. After all, a consumer may not know where long-term negative health effects come from; but a yeast infection after one use of a product they bought in your store can mean one customer guaranteed not to come back, or, even worse, spread the

bad gospel about your establishment.

"If our customers were to get a yeast infection, they are likely to discontinue use of that product," explains Gina Long, co-owner of Hidden Talents in Huntington Beach. "They will be unhappy with their purchase, as well as my company, for not informing them of the risk. Telling our customers to use flavored lubricants [containing sugar] only for oral sex is just one example of looking out for them."

In this case, making sure consumers aren't using glycerine combina-

tions internally (that contain sugar) should be sufficient. Be a proactive retailer and either use signage or offer a cautionary word to buyers that not all lubricant is suitable for internal use, and let them know if you carry sugar-free glycerin lubricant that can be used internally. For more information on sugar-free glycerin lubricants, contact your favorite distributor or manufacturer.

(4) Benzocaine/ Lidocaine: Local anesthetics commonly used as topical pain relievers; found frequently in anal lubricants.

In concept and function alone, there's nothing wrong with these guys. They do their job, which is most commonly easing the discomfort of anal sex. The problem, according to some manufacturers, is that they can do their job too well. "(The chemicals) can cause complete numbing in anal products. This is extremely dangerous, as loss of sensation can cause tearing," explains Powley.

"There's a reason why there's a little pain associated with anal play,"

An advertisement for Sliquid Organics. At the top, there is a blue gear-like logo above the text 'sliquid' in a large, lowercase font, with 'organics' in a smaller font below it. Below the text are three bottles of lubricant. The central bottle is in focus, showing a white label with the Sliquid Organics logo and the text 'Botanically Infused glycerine & paraben free natural intimate lubricant 8.5 fl oz / 255 ml e'. To the left of the bottles are several pink flowers. At the bottom of the advertisement, there is a text box with the following text: 'Offering women a healthier choice, this glycerine & paraben free lubricant has been blended with certified organic botanical extracts that heal and support the body. For more information, call (800) SLIQUID, or visit www.SliquidOrganics.com'.

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Elliot says. "You want to know when enough is enough and not to push the envelope." But desensitizing agents eliminate that warning sign to slow down or go easy. Barnard adds, "pain is your body's way of telling you that something is wrong, and if you block those sensations with benzocaine or other anesthetics, you could find yourself seriously injured."

These lubricants are also used to help delay ejaculation, so they serve their purpose to that extent. Just keep in mind that retailers need to be extremely sensitive in selling these lubricants for anal purposes. If your customer is trying the back door for the first time, our industry experts suggest that a numbing spray may not be their best option.

Herbaglide's alum-free vaginal tightener



(5) Alum: A salt that is a combination of alkali metals; approved by the FDA but being sourced out of canning and preservation practices in the U.S., as quantities of an ounce or more can allegedly be toxic to humans.

Sometimes, evaluating the use of a chemical or product takes on a different light when you consider its other uses. In the case of Alum, commonly used in

"With the new awareness of health, and the impact certain materials and ingredients can have on our bodies, it would be irresponsible for us not to represent products that are healthier for us on every level."

— Laura Sweet, Honey's Place

vaginal tighteners, other places you'll find it include deodorants, antiseptics and blood clotters. In food products, Alum is used in the pickling process to help canned and jarred food maintain their crispness. But even the FDA has stated that, with quality produce and modern canning methods, there is no need to use Alum in those particular applications.

"If you think of toys and lubes as essentially homeopathic products, you start to question using something that could very well be toxic on mucus membranes that could absorb these chemicals," explains Tonya Chappell, manager of Pasion in Philadelphia.

"(Alum) simply dehydrates vaginal tissue, which is extremely unhealthy," adds Powley.

There are, however, some vaginal tightening products on the market that reportedly do not use Alum, such as Intimate Organics and Herbaglide. Again, contact your favorite distributor for more information on these and other products.

(6) L-Arginine: An amino acid, arginine plays an important role in cell division, the healing of wounds, removing ammonia from the body, immune function, and the release of hormones. Commonly found in clitoral stimulating gels and lubricants, as well as a treatment for erectile dysfunction.

L-Arginine is one of the chemicals that frequent stimulating gels. "It works by bringing blood to the surface of where you apply it," explains Elliot. "It's wonderful in theory, and for women who don't have problems with it, it's a great product. But if a person has ever had genital warts or herpes, there's a chance that (L-Arginine) will reactivate it."

Barnard points out another key factor in L-Arginine; it reportedly has the desired effect of increasing blood flow to the genitals when ingested at levels of 1,000 to 2,000 mg a day. The additional sensation a woman may experience otherwise might come simply from the application; many stimulating gels instruct the user to rub it on for five to 10 minutes.

Even for retailers who easily develop trusting rapport with customers, quizzing patrons on past or current sexually transmitted infections is a delicate matter. You want to respect their privacy, but still want to make sure they're buying the right product for themselves. Signage stating that certain products containing L-Arginine can jumpstart a recurrence of STDs is the safest bet to keeping customers informed but comfortable.

(7) Nonoxynol-9 (N-9): A chemical widely used in various cleaning and cosmetic products; commonly found in spermicidal lubricants, condoms and toy cleaners. →

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“Just asking about fetish and sexual preference is not enough. Knowing reactions to materials and ingredients, and informing customers of this, will ensure happy, long-term purchases.”
— Michelle Zangari, *Wicked Pleasures*

Mighty Tidy toy cleaner, free of N-9, by Jelique



When a chemical promises to do something specific like, say, rigorously curb the transmission of HIV, STDs and sperm, it seems like a no-brainer to add it to lubes and condoms. But when the science comes back and groups like the World Health Organization (WHO), Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and UNAIDS program come back and reportedly say that it actually increases the transmission of HIV, and should never be used anally, doubts begin to arise.

To be fair for a moment, N-9 is a very effective spermicide. But when the lab tests were done back in the 1970s and 1980s, they showed that, in test tubes, N-9 was very effective at killing microbes and sperm alike. The problem was that test tubes, unlike humans, don't develop lesions and abrasions from repeated use of a harsh chemical. These abrasions, according to a six-year test done by the UNAIDS program, allegedly aid the transmission of the HIV virus by almost 50 percent.

Study results from the major health organizations seem to suggest that repeated use actually causes consistent damage to vaginal walls, and WHO has said that N-9 should not be used at all for anal sex. Additionally, N-9 is a detergent,

chemical cleaner being used in some of the most sensitive areas of the human body.

If you choose to keep spermicides in your store inventory, ensure the safety and well-being of consumers by adding signage that clearly states that spermicides should only be used to prevent pregnancy (not HIV or STDs), and are recommended for monogamous couples. Keep in mind though that, according once again to the WHO, sales of spermicidal products have been falling steadily in the U.S. and globally since the 1980s.

(8) Menthol: An organic compound made synthetically or obtained from peppermint or other mint oils; found in stimulating or intensifying clitoral gels

Menthol works by irritating the skin, and when said skin is that of the clitoris, it makes one think twice before voluntarily

irritating it. The response a user feels is the skin sending blood to the surface in reaction to the inflammation produced by menthol. The problem arises in the fact that menthol is also an alcohol (in chemistry terms, not Captain Morgan terms), and at the same time that it irritates the skin, it also breaks down the surface of the skin. This reportedly produces the increased sensation that a woman experiences.

“Most of the folks who choose to use menthol-containing stimulation products are doing so because they are not experiencing sensation as well as they would like,” says Barnard. “The reason they don't experience sensation as well as they like, however, is that they aren't healthy.”

Barnard cites conditions like obesity or diabetes, which can impair blood flow to the extremities, including genitals.

According to some of those who responded to our interview requests, using menthol-based products, for some consumers, simply isn't treating the right problem. They can enjoy a temporary increase in blood flow, but that can pave the way for additional irritation.

Still, many popular products exist with menthol in them. But Barnard warns that “those who react strongly to menthol the first time are more likely to show strong negative reactions to it the second, third or fourth time around.”

Everyone has their role in the future of “safe” products

So where does this leave adult novelty? We have a laundry list of materials that range from potential carcinogens to harsh detergents, visible in all realms of manufacturing. The upside is that, while there are plenty of materials that have some people sweating — and, admittedly, others calling such a discussion unnecessarily alarmist — body-safe alternative options abound. Many materials were created simply to carve their own niche in the market; others, with a specific dedication to being body-friendly. Regardless of their impetus into the industry, the alternatives mean being able to offer a varied selection with plenty of opportunities to flex your brain muscle and, hopefully, do some upselling.

There was one constant concern that many of our retailers addressed, beyond what-does-what-and-why. They feel their business would run much more smoothly if they received guidance and education directly from those closest to the products; namely, manufacturers and distributors. Whether it means making ingredient listings available online or ensuring all relevant educational materials are enclosed in every shipment, retailers want to devote more time to selling products, not researching them. Whether it is online, through the Better Business Bureau, customer feedback, medical journals or other magazines or newspapers, the retail storeowners and sales associates have become the front line — and, according to some estimations, the vanguard and reserve forces — when it comes to ensuring customers know what is right for them.

While it is a role that many stores have adopted willingly (several storeowners proudly explained that they did everything from tasting, smelling, touching and trying products out before they put them on their shelves), simply labeling a product “phthalate-free” is, in some eyes, not enough. Understanding the “why” of such labels would serve to strengthen all links in the chain of retail sales. →