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Stop pollution of plastic from cosmetics through an EU-wide ban

Microplastics have been intentionally added to cosmetic products since the 1960s and are part of the many microplastics that are now present in aquatic environments. An increasing number of scientific publications highlight negative effects. Among the most important of these effects are that microplastics:

- in marine and freshwater environments persist for hundreds of years;
- are found everywhere, even in the most remote places on earth;
- pass through wastewater sewage treatment plants;
- are ingested by freshwater and marine species;
- hinder the growth of floating aquatic plants;
- absorb persistent organic contaminants;
- bioaccumulate in animals across the aquatic food chain and end up in the seafood on our plate;
- are therefore a serious threat to ecosystems and human health.

Further proof of the existence of microplastics in various cosmetic products, like lipstick and nail polish, is provided by Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Nanoplastics, (nanoparticles made from various different types of plastic) are also used in cosmetic products. Compared with microparticles of the same material, nanoparticles are a concern because of their small size. They are more likely to react with cells and biological components such as proteins, and to travel through organisms, which increases their chances of becoming distributed into organs and activating inflammatory and immunological responses. We know very little of the toxicity of nanoplastics. A recent report has shown that nanopolystyrene can accumulate in fish brains (Lund University) following ingestion with food.

A voluntary measure taken by European industry to phase out microplastics concentrates on synthetic, solid particles used for exfoliation and cleansing. According to Cosmetics Europe, this led to an 82% reduction in plastic exfoliating microbeads between 2012 and 2015. Under this voluntary measure, the same chemical ingredients may remain in the cosmetic formulations for functions other

than exfoliating. No industry-wide measures have been taken to remove non-exfoliating solid synthetic polymers from cosmetic ingredients.

Using a narrow definition, the European cosmetic industry created loopholes in the voluntary measure to phase out microplastics in cosmetics and continues the use of other types of microplastics in cosmetics. Now, in 2017, plastics of different kinds are still being added to many different types of care products in solid, and wax form that have a whole range of purposes.

The international Beat the Microbead coalition (92 NGOs in 38 countries) concludes that the plastic pollution of our waters by the cosmetics industry has not stopped and will not stop as long as the cosmetics industry is given the liberty to define what constitutes 'microplastics' itself. In Europe, the European Commission must take the lead in protecting the environment from plastic pollution through cosmetic products by setting clear rules for the cosmetics industry.

The Beat the Microbead coalition therefore urges the European Commission to:

- reconsider the current exception of polymers from registration and evaluation under REACH
- present legislative proposals for selecting polymers for registration
- issue and enforce a new EU regulation to ban all polymer ingredients that are persistent, bioaccumulative and/or toxic to ecosystems in all cosmetic products;
- enforce a ban that creates a level playing field for industry, provides clarity for consumers, encourages the innovation of sustainable alternatives and above all stops this source of plastic pollution at source;
- regulate plastics and microplastics emissions into the environment, taking into account their persistency, bioaccumulation and toxicity. This will facilitate future regulation independent of the source.

Context

Continued use of microplastics

The US Microbead-Free Waters Act of December 2015 recognises microplastics as a major environmental pollutant and bans the use of microplastics in rinse-off products. The Act has been criticised for not going far enough because it does not address microplastics in other types of cosmetics. Similarly, the European cosmetic industry is using a limited definition (only microplastics with the function scrubbing/exfoliating/cleansing in rinse off products) that allows the continued use of microplastics in products like deodorants, shaving gel, make-up and sunscreen. The cosmetics industry defines their products by their usage, for example wash-off or rinse-off, while other products such as leave-on may also contain plastic ingredients.

There is abundant evidence that the cosmetics industry in Europe continues to widely use microplastics in care products and that this goes far beyond the use of polyethylene for exfoliation.

The following links contain lists of microplastic ingredients and products that contain microplastics.

Beat the Microbead Campaign: www.beatthemicrobead.org

NGO BUND: “Mikroplastik die unsichtbare Gefahr” list with hundreds of cosmetic products that still contain plastic ingredients

https://www.bund.net/fileadmin/user_upload_bund/publikationen/meere/meere_mikroplastik_einkaufsfuehrer.pdf

NGO Flora and Fauna International: List of 110 examples of plastic ingredients. ([Appendix 4](#))

UNEP: Plastics in cosmetics. List of solid-phase, water insoluble plastic ingredients (table 2.1 of [Plastic in cosmetics](#), UNEP report 2015).

[Report](#) by Tauw consultancy for the Belgian government (2015): Appendix 1 “List of synthetic polymers (non-soluble) that can occur as synthetic microparticles.

Before a ban is in force, we demand that companies, producers and brands publicly guarantee that their products are 100% free of microplastics. Some brands have already done this and are featured in the Look for the Zero strategy. <http://www.beatthemicrobead.org/look-for-the-zero/>

‘Small source’ but easy to stop

Microplastics in cosmetics is a relatively small source of pollution compared to other sources like paint, textiles, pellet spills and tyre dust. So why is it of utmost importance to ban microplastics in cosmetics in addition to these other sources as part of Europe’s policy to mitigate plastic pollution?

‘Relatively small’ still means huge. British research revealed that one single 5 ml use of a facial scrub contains between 4,500 and 94,500 microbeads.

Microplastics are intentionally added by the cosmetic industry. Formulas can be changed and environmental friendly alternatives are widely available and can be used instead.

Redesigning personal care products is the most effective way to stop the source of microplastics in cosmetic products which enter the environment once and for all.

The issue of microbeads brings microplastics to the attention of many people who were previously unaware that this environmental problem existed.

When consumers unknowingly use cosmetic products that contain microplastics, they are made the culprits in contributing to the plastic soup.

Consumers’ confusion

Few people understand the difficult chemical names of all the different microplastics used. It is very hard for the average consumer to know if a product is free of microplastics from reading labels as the naming is confusing.

When there is a limited phase out of microplastics – for example exfoliating polyethylene microplastics in scrubs – consumers are led to believe that the product they use is free of microplastics, while the contrary is true.

Unless and until there is clarity that the care products they buy are completely free of any microplastics, it is likely that consumers will lose confidence in both industry and governments.

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