

## Concern Rises Over Effects of Parabens

• **By Julie Deardorff**

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**Straight to the Source**

A vigilant label reader, 36-year-old Karen Altschul of Vernon Hills has known her favorite lotions and sunscreens contained parabens, or synthetic chemicals used as preservatives. But now that she routinely sees products at Sephora touted as "paraben-free," she wonders: "What, exactly, are parabens, and are they dangerous?"

Those are questions more consumers are asking now that "paraben-free" offerings have hit the mainstream; products made by Burt's Bees, which never has used parabens, are available everywhere from Whole Foods and Target to Borders, CVS, Walgreens and even Hallmark stores.

For years, parabens (methyl, ethyl, propyl and benzyl) have been considered a cheap and indispensable way to inhibit the growth of bacteria, yeasts and molds in personal-care products such as shampoos, conditioners, deodorants and sunscreens. Parabens are why products can survive the three-month boat trip from China, sit on store or warehouse shelves for years or be exposed to extreme temperatures.

But studies have shown that some parabens can mimic the activity of the hormone estrogen in the body's cells. Estrogenic activity in the body is associated with certain forms of breast cancer. And parabens are turning up in breast tumors.

What further concerns some scientists is that parabens aren't the only potential endocrine disrupter out there. Breast tissue and breast milk are exposed to a range of chemicals, including pesticides and polychlorinated biphenyls.

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