

# tasweekend

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## CUTTING THROUGH THE GREENWASH

LABELS ON MANY HOME AND BEAUTY PRODUCTS GUSH ABOUT THEIR 'NATURAL' INGREDIENTS – BUT THE FINE PRINT TELLS A DIFFERENT STORY

**FOOD** A TOAST TO SMASHED AVO **TRAVEL** MAKING A SPLASH AT THE TAHUNE **BOOKS** A CONVICT STORY



# Chemical reaction

Will eliminating potentially harmful substances in beauty and household cleaning products really make that much of a difference to your health? The anecdotal stories of several Tasmanians suggests it might

WORDS TRACY RENKIN PHOTOGRAPHY CHRIS KIDD

**B**efore Bec Hartnett was aware of the chemicals lurking in the beauty products she used every day, she was bed-bound once a month with crippling labour-like pains. "I had terrible hormonal monthly cramps," Hartnett says. "Every single month." Hartnett was using an expensive "healthy" beauty range spruiking marketing words like "beneficial" and "safe" and "pure" and promising "health and wellness inside and out".

Fed up with the inconvenience and pain, the Rose Bay mother of two and part-time nurse, 37, started researching the listed ingredients in her "natural" moisturiser and toner and cleanser, shampoo and conditioner and found what she believes was the

culprit: phenoxyethanol, a preservative commonly used in cosmetics that authorities consider safe at up to 1 per cent concentration. But Hartnett says: "It's a hormone disrupter preservative. I threw out hundreds of dollars worth of beauty products that had that listed in the ingredients and by next month my pain had substantially decreased. I am positive it was the cause of my terrible pain." She is now pain-free.

She's also now chemical free, thanks to an overwhelming and fierce feeling of protection she experienced when she held her first child four years ago.

Hartnett is one of a growing number of Tasmanians going chemical free. Some do it for health reasons such as to reduce the risk of allergies, some over concern for the environment,

and others because of medical research, which is increasingly warning of the dangers lurking in the chemicals in the cleaning and beauty products in our homes.

"Little did I know that William's birth would spark such a strong desire to lead a more natural-inspired lifestyle," Hartnett says. "I thought we were leading a pretty healthy life but as soon as he entered the world, boy did those nurturing, care-giving hormones kick in and I realised I could do so much better."

She discovered nasties in the baby skincare products, in nappies and wipes and, well, "pretty much everything". Her synthetic, allergy-free and antibacterial pillows were swapped for wool pillows she airs in sunlight to kill dust mites. She's done away with complicated beauty routines and now uses a simple



Retired dermatologist Frances Watkins says "natural" beauty products are a myth. She recommends people with allergies read the labels to avoid fragrances, preservatives and foaming agents.

moisturiser and sunscreen. Plastic containers were replaced with glass containers. It's been a slow process but she's worked hard to eliminate products and items in their house that were full of chemicals. Hartnett can no longer tolerate artificial fragrances like scented candles, perfumes and plug-in air fresheners that contain phthalates to make them last longer - they give her an instant headache. "I love fresh flowers and am a big fan of indoor plants," she says. "Over time we just slowly swapped out things that were not so great and now pretty much our whole house is toxic free." It's been a life-changing new habit that's given her a new direction and a new tribe.

Hartnett was so frustrated with the ridiculous hours she spent online researching the complicated ingredient listings to determine if products were really safe to use, seven months into her second pregnancy she started her own online directory, Eco and Us. "I just saw a need," she says. "There are many green-



Left: Rebecca Hartnett of Rose Bay with her children William 4, and Eva, 1, has created a national online directory listing "chemical-free, non-toxic" products. Above: The Carter family, Oberon, Maisie, 7, Audrey 14, Xanthe, 11, and Lauren mix up a batch of chemical-free toothpaste at their Taroona home.

washed [many claim they are green, but they are not] brands out there that are spending lots of money on new ways to confuse us, trying to make us believe their toxic ingredients are safe. I was just sick of having to constantly decipher ingredient lists every time I wanted to shop. I knew how hard it was to find good-quality, natural products that were what they said they were because there are heaps of 'natural' products out there that really aren't because they still have loads of crappy ingredients in them. It was damn confusing shopping for authentic toxic-free natural brands. Everywhere I looked I seemed to be faced with fake natural brands trying to fool me that claimed they were something they weren't. It did my head in."

To save others the same frustration, Hartnett decided to create her own directory, which includes a checklist of things you can swap out in your home including cosmetics, cleaning and make-up items.

Retired Hobart dermatologist Frances Watkins says reactions to skin-care products could be irritant or allergic. "If the reaction is irritant then the product just needs to be avoided," Watkins says. "This is often the case with soaps, cleansers and shampoos. If the reaction is allergic then the specific ingredients causing the allergy need to be avoided by reading the ingredient list carefully and sourcing products that don't contain the problem ingredient." She says the most common ingredients causing allergies are preservatives, fragrances and foaming agents. "As a general principle we should try to avoid chemicals," she says. Watkins says natural beauty products are a myth. "Read the fine print of the ingredient list and you will see these products are full of preservative chemicals," she says.

Frances and husband Bill Watkins, Tasmania's leading fertility expert, have been reducing their own chemical exposure in their home and garden for more than six years. This January, Bill Watkins attended a Madrid fertility conference where one of the speakers covered fertility and environmental chemical exposure. "The key speaker was very passionate about reducing the number of chemicals we are exposed to around the home," he says. "She was saying her work showed you can measure chemical levels in babies straight after they are born. So the placenta is not a perfect filter and I suppose it's fairly logical really that those chemicals are going to be passed on to babies. Even though they are not terribly high levels, and there's no direct evidence of harm to babies, it's common sense to try and avoid chemicals."

Meanwhile, in the Carter family's home in Taroona, if you look under the kitchen sink - or even under the bathroom or laundry sink - it will look a lot different from the norm. You won't find any commercial cleaning or beauty products. These guys are experts at thinking outside the box when it comes to chemical-free beauty and cleaning products.

Lauren, 41, and Oberon, 42, and their three daughters Audrey, 14, Xanthe, 11, and Maisie, 7, make their own bathroom and

cleaning products from raw ingredients they buy in bulk. They use recipes they have tweaked over time that are great alternatives and don't make unnecessary waste. In fact, in the Carter house the rule is if they are going to put something on their body, then they have to be willing to eat it too. "I wouldn't put anything on the outside of my body that I wouldn't eat," Lauren says. "So that's a way of looking at it - if you are willing to eat it, then you are going to be OK about putting it on the outside of your body. But think about the things you put on the outside of your body and question whether you would be willing to ingest them. A lot of those products would say 'do not ingest'. We wouldn't have to go to the hospital for ingesting anything that we use to clean or put on our bodies."

Lauren creates a dry shampoo using arrowroot powder or tapioca flour with a little bit of cacao. She also makes her own face powder using the same ingredients and Oberon whips up his hair wax out of almond oil, beeswax, and essential oil. "If you look at the ingredients list on the back of hair products, it's like a chemistry experiment," Oberon says. "We make our own toothpaste, which is based on coconut oil, bi-carb and essential oils and we also sometimes use dried, crushed eggshells and activated charcoal and bentonite clay. We make our own deodorant, too, which can also use a lot of the same ingredients as our toothpaste. So sometimes if we run out of toothpaste, you can just use the deodorant and vice versa, which is really good. It's great to only have to pack one when you are travelling."

A lot of the things the Carters do now are based on the best of what was done in the past, combined with what they now know to make them even better. "Looking to the past can give you some of the answers you are looking for," Oberon says. "Sometimes it's about looking back at how people used to do it in the old days." Lauren's grandfather was a professional house cleaner who swore by vinegar and newspapers for making windows gleam. "You don't need to go and get a window spray that looks like bright blue Gatorade with all these added abrasive chemicals in it," Oberon says. "Vinegar and newspaper work really well. There was a real kind of embracing of chemicals for a long time. Things that today we would never consider consuming were recommended to be ingested. So it's only through the increased understanding of the impacts of different products, or ingredients, or chemicals that we know better now and I feel we are going to know better in 50 years time," he says.

"It's worth looking back and asking the elders, ask your grandparents if they are still around or someone who is from a past generation how they might have done something and then you might find a chemical-free alternative there because it might have been before all of these products were out that they are always trying to coax you into buying."

The Carters store all their food and cleaning and beauty products in glass jars. Oberon says his family avoids chemicals like BPA found in plastics. ▶

## COVERSTORY



spire each other, share ideas, resources and knowledge. We discuss and swap different ways of thinking and doing things like recipes for how to make chemical-free toothpaste, deodorants and cleaning products."

Dyer has been striving for a chemical-free lifestyle since she was struck down in 2001 with glandular fever and chronic fatigue. She now feels more energised than ever. "I was a vegetable for three months. I could barely get dressed without help, make a cup of tea or do the dishes - let alone function at work. I'd gone from being this super energetic, active person to not being able to perform even the most simple household jobs. In fact, I couldn't even get out of bed. It was pretty scary. It took me five years to recover. Now I'm working 14-hour days, four days a week and feel very energised. You are in a better position than before if you just eliminate one chemical-laden product and then focus on what the next one will be," she says. "There are a lot of businesses down here doing great things. We are really lucky that we live in a place like Tasmania where there are so many people passionate about chemical-free," she says. Dyer is now so immersed in a chemical-free world that she feels it's just normal. "It's only when I step out of the tribe that I realise we are not the norm," she says. "The businesses and fruit and vegetable growers and community groups I'm connected with all embrace this way of living."

One of Dyer's tribe is South Hobart's Gaby Jung, a seasoned chemical-free, nature-loving gardener who uses both her front and back yards to grow all the vegetables and herbs she needs. She supplies homegrown organic herbs and other greens to Harvest Feast every week, carefully wrapping her produce in recycled rice bag packaging and loading them into the big basket on her trike for a delivery in the pre-dawn dark.

Environmental concerns led Jung to follow a toxic-free lifestyle, which she's been living for about 20 years. "I personally think you actually save a huge amount of money if you don't buy all these products that you supposedly need because you don't really need all those products," Jung says. "I haven't used deodorant for about 40 years. I always found that the stuff stinks so I never really used it and then when I found out deodorant is based on aluminium then why would I expose myself to that kind of stuff?"

She says she hasn't bought shampoo and conditioner for she doesn't know how long. "Water does a brilliant job for washing my hair and nobody has said that my hair is stinky or anything and every now and then I also use apple cider vinegar on my hair because that's really nice," she says. "If I'm washing the floor, I usually put a bit of apple cider vinegar into the wash water or bicarb soda so I haven't bought any of those toxic cleaning products, that most households have, for a very long time."

And Jung may be on to something, because a recent Norwegian study from the University of Bergen suggests regular use of cleaning sprays over several decades can have as much of an impact on our health as smoking a pack of cigarettes a day. She says she feels she has a responsibility as an elder to actually make good again and to be an example to others to show you can live with less. "There has always been a part of me that has been interested in alternative kinds of things, how you can do things differently," she says.

Being aware of the dangers of these chemicals can swing people away from using them says Eco and Us founder Bec Hartnett, but eliminating them altogether can be a daunting process. Her advice is to just start ticking things off your list. "You have to start somewhere," Hartnett says. "Don't beat yourself up about what you can't control, just focus on the ones you can change. Don't get overwhelmed by the big picture, just take little steps and you will get to your end goal. Each day adds up to big results."

For more information go online and find @harvestfeast; @ecoandus; @zerowastetasmantia; @spiralgarden

SAM ROSEWARNE

"Plastics have lots of other chemicals," he says. "Plastic is not a stable material chemically so over time as the plastic deteriorates it can release chemicals into your food or whatever it comes in contact with." The Carters started their chemical-free lifestyle about 15 years ago because Lauren suffers from terrible eczema outbreaks if she comes into contact with products containing sodium lauryl sulphate, prevalent in dishwashing liquids, shampoos and cleaning products that foam when you use them. She started making vinegar cleaning sprays to avoid commercial, chemically heavy products that caused her eczema flare-

ups. "There's always a budget-friendly chemical-free alternative," Lauren says. "The best way to avoid those chemicals that can harm you is to make your own products because you know exactly what the ingredients are."

Michelle Dyer, who runs the Salamanca Market Harvest Feast organic fruit and vegetable stall every Saturday, believes her health improved dramatically after she eliminated chemicals. "I'm super lucky to be immersed in a Tassie community with a huge interest in living a chemical-free life," Dyer says. "Given we live in a smaller community we can connect more easily to in-

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Above left: Gaby Jung has been living a toxin-free lifestyle for 20 years and says it is her duty as an elder of society to educate others on the benefits - in between gardening and delivering her organic produce to Harvest Feast at Salamanca Market.



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