



PRESERVATIVES: PROTECTING CONSUMERS

We choose our cosmetic and personal care products according to brand, price, quality and function taking for granted that they will remain usable for a long time. As with many other consumer products, this is only possible thanks to the presence of preservatives.

These essential ingredients effectively protect the consumer and reduce the risk of products becoming contaminated by bacteria.

The use of preservatives is from time to time questioned. Preservatives are a recurring topic in public discussions and some people associate them with harmful, modern chemicals. This fact sheet will answer many of the most frequently asked questions about preservatives and explain why it makes good sense to use these ingredients in the majority of cosmetics and personal care products.

What is a preservative?

Preservatives are ingredients designed to protect products against contamination by microorganisms during storage and continued use by consumers.

Product safety is the number one priority for the cosmetics industry and we therefore provide products that have been treated to prevent contamination by microorganisms. Bacteria, yeasts and moulds are always present on our skin, in the air around us and even in the water we drink. Contamination of products, especially those used around the eyes and on skin, can cause significant problems. Preservatives can prevent these problems.

Are preservatives safe?

Yes, those preservatives approved for use in cosmetics and personal care products are safe.

Any preservative used in cosmetics and personal care products is subject to strict EU safety legislation before being approved for use. It is important to remember the primary reason for the use of preservatives: the protection of the health and safety of consumers by reducing the risk of contamination of products.

A very small number of people may have allergic reactions to certain preservatives, just as some people develop allergies to nuts, nickel, pollen, seafood etc. However, allergies to preservatives are rare and ingredient labelling in accordance with the European legislation allows people to identify and thus avoid products, which contain the preservative to which they may be allergic.



Why do we need preservatives?

We need preservatives to prevent contamination of products.

You may not think of preservatives as an essential part of your skin care and cosmetics, but without question cosmetics and personal care products need preservatives. Without preservatives cosmetic products, just like food and other consumer products can become contaminated with bacteria and yeasts, and could cause irritations or infections, particularly if the product comes into contact with damaged or broken skin or the sensitive areas around the eyes. That's why we need preservatives.

How is it ensured that my cosmetics are not being contaminated?

The use of preservatives helps minimise the contamination risk.

Just like food, cosmetics can become contaminated by micro-organisms unless the product is preserved. This is especially true for products that are used by several people over a longer period of time. Even at home, there are simply dozens of opportunities to come into contact with bacteria and thus introduce them into a product: door handles, pets, foods, dust etc. Furthermore, cosmetics and personal care products are often kept in warm, steamy bathrooms. These are ideal breeding grounds for bacteria. The use of a small amount of a preservative can prevent contamination from these sources for a long period of time. In addition to the use of preservatives, the following tips will help to keep your cosmetics usable for a long period of time.

- Keep lids on products when not in use and use the product within the recommended timeframe (if a date is shown on the product).
- Avoid storing your products in direct sunlight or near sources of heat and choose dry, cool (but not freezing) storage areas where possible.
- Never dilute products or mix with other products (unless directed to do so by the use instructions).
- Apply cosmetic products with clean hands or an applicator and routinely wash all applicators thoroughly with soap, detergent or a mild shampoo.
- Allow applicators to dry completely before use.
- Avoid sharing your personal cosmetic products with another person.



Are preservatives a new discovery?

Preservatives were used already in ancient history.

Many people think of preservatives as a relatively recent invention belonging to the second half of the 20th century. In fact, preservatives have been around for thousands of years. Already the ancient Egyptians were skilled cosmetic manufacturers. Among the ingredients of their eye-shadows the Egyptians used copper sulphate, a known preservative.

Today's preservatives for cosmetic and personal care products are highly sophisticated and effective. Only small amounts are required to protect large quantities of products for many years and keep the consumer safe.

Do natural products contain preservatives?

Yes, also natural products contain preservatives.

The modern trend to produce natural products drives consumers' demand for this type of ingredients also in cosmetics and personal care products (e.g. jojoba, avocado, fruit pulp, plant extracts etc.). However, natural ingredients can sometimes be even more prone to microbial growth —just think about how long a head of lettuce lasts in your refrigerator. Plant extracts can contain bacteria and spores which can multiply in the packaged product on the store shelf or once the product is purchased and taken home for use. In order to prevent this, preservatives are used.

What kinds of products contain preservatives?

Most products contain preservatives.

Preservatives are necessary in most cosmetics and personal care products, from hair care and skin care products to personal hygiene etc. A few selected categories of products can be made completely without preservatives. For example, high alcohol content products (perfumes, deodorants, hair sprays) and/or sealed container products (e.g. aerosols) are often preservative-free. Single use products (e.g. samples, hair colorants etc.) are also often preservative-free. These products can rely on the use of ingredients that are less likely to become contaminated (e.g. high alcohol content is per se a form of preservation). It is neither practical nor possible to make all cosmetics and personal care products preservative-free (see next section).



Cosmetics Europe
the personal care association

Is there an alternative to using preservatives?

No, we need preservatives to prevent contamination of products.

Without preservatives many cosmetics and personal care products would have to be kept in the refrigerator and even then they would eventually spoil just as perishable foods do over a period of time. Once opened, we would have to treat most cosmetics and personal care products just like fresh foods and ensure they are used within a very short use-by date (*). This would involve very high costs for consumers, not to mention the impractical introduction of a refrigerator in our bathrooms!

(*) Note: In the European Union, cosmetic product labels show either a “date of minimum durability” (“best used before the end of”) or a “period after opening” to inform for how long the product may be kept or used.



**Best used before
the end of**



Period after opening

Everything for your safety

The cosmetics and personal care industry considers consumer safety as a top priority and is constantly researching to provide high quality and safe products. Millions of consumers enjoy cosmetics and personal care products every day.