

Microbeads: care for your skin, care for our oceans

Every day, garbage left on beaches across the world is swept into the ocean, polluting our water and poisoning the sea life. Plastic comprises a major part of the unclaimed waste, from medium-sized water bottles, lighters, and medical syringes, to tiny plastic beads. Microbeads differ from other garbage in that they are not purposely left behind. Rather, they are added to skincare and everyday products like facial scrubs, toothpaste, and shower gels.

Microbeads are getting into the food chain and this has raised a lot of concern. Their tiny size makes it impossible for them to be filtered. They pass through our drains and sewage systems, picking up chemicals in the process, before finally ending up in our oceans. Fish mistake microbeads as food and swallow them whole – including their toxins – but are unable to digest them. These non-biodegradable microplastics pose significant, long-term threats to their health. A study showed that fish that consumed plastic were more prone to develop liver tumors. Consequently, with fish as part of our diet, we are indirectly putting poison into our own bodies.

Product labeling could further complicate the situation. Labels often include formal, scientific terms that are difficult to understand. That makes identifying microbeads from a list of ingredients extremely hard. A recent study in Hong Kong¹ which sampled 1,413 cosmetic products demonstrated the need for clear, fully disclosed lists. In fact, almost half of the sampled products did not have clear labeling – some of the labels were in Japanese or Korean, while some did not have any labels at all. Worryingly, around 37% of the products with proper labeling were found to contain microplastics. Consumers want to be environmentally friendly, but without a better labeling system, it can be difficult for them to make informed decisions.

Governments around the world are trying to tackle the problem by banning cosmetic products with plastic microbeads. The UK, the US, and Canada, for example, have pledged to ban these products completely by 2019. It may be a few years before similar initiatives come into effect in Asia, but there are still things you can do in the meantime to avoid adding to the problem. Greenpeace and other environmental organizations provide comprehensive lists of products containing microbeads on their websites, so educate your family and friends about their harmful effects and encourage each other to only use microbead-free products.

¹ Kao, E. (2016, October 12). Microbeads omitted from ingredient label in half of beauty products in major Hong Kong cosmetic retailers. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/2027485/no-proper-labelling-half-beauty-products-major>

1 Read the text and check the sentences True (T), False (F), or the information is Not Given (NG).

- a Plastic makes up a significant part of the garbage found in the ocean. T ☐ F ☐ NG ☐
- b People are worried about microbeads entering their food. T ☐ F ☐ NG ☐
- c People are at more risk of developing cancer if they eat fish that have consumed plastic. T ☐ F ☐ NG ☐
- d Consumers can easily find out if a product contains microbeads from its label. T ☐ F ☐ NG ☐
- e Asia plans to ban microbeads after the UK, the US, and Canada. T ☐ F ☐ NG ☐
- f Most shower gel contains microbeads. T ☐ F ☐ NG ☐

2 Do you agree or disagree with these sentences? Talk to a partner.

- a All product labels should contain simple, easy-to-understand terms.
- b We should stop eating fish until microbeads are banned worldwide.
- c We should conduct more research before banning microbeads in products.

3 What plastic garbage may end up in the ocean? Write some examples. Then suggest ways to reduce the garbage.

plastic garbage	ways to reduce the garbage