



HOW OLD IS TOO YOUNG FOR BEAUTY BOOSTERS?

With depilatory creams, tattoos, streaks and tints being all the rage among youngsters, has the beauty myth gone too far below a safe and healthy limit?

By CHITRA NARAYANAN

In an episode of TV series *Friends*, Rachel hits the root when Phoebe suggests that her toddler enter a beauty pageant. In the end, however, Rachel expertly makes up the baby's face, even dabbling on lipstick, only to have Ross scream at her about the ill effects of beauty products on an infant's skin.

Babies and make-up? The *Friends* episode is only a slight exaggeration. In the US, according to market research firm Experian, 43% of six-nine year olds are already using lipstick or lip gloss, 38% are using hairpinning products, and 12% are using other cosmetics. Such surveys are not available for India, but parents say children are increasingly becoming beauty conscious. In Chennai, eight-year-old Shreya Thomas, a Class III student, loves lipstick and would like to use it "like Mama does".

She has a "safe for children" make-up kit, but her mother wonders if lip gloss is all right. Thomas is not alone. It's fairly common to find young girls—and increasingly, boys—heading to a beauty salon or spa for face and hair "treatments". It could be the result of changing cultural mores (such as televised contests where children dress up as "stars" and undergo beauty pageants, even in schools), or peer pressure. For example, spa media and marketing company Spalinder's forecast of hot new trends for India includes sessions for teens and tweens. So where do doctors stand on this?

Old enough for war paint?

"Till 18, don't touch beauty treatments," says Snehal Sriram, head, medical services, Kaya Skin Clinic, Mumbai. "Young children should not use beauty products at all, because their immune system is not fully developed," says Ajita Bagal, consultant dermatologist, Max Health-care, New Delhi. But what are the specifics? What is okay, and when?

This is probably the aspect of puberty that make teens most self-conscious. However, most dermatologists agree on hair removal beginning only three years after the onset of puberty. In recent years, Dr Bagal says, more girls are attaining puberty at an average age of nine, which may well put that age at 13. Other doctors are more conservative. "Wait till your body's hormonal pattern has stabilised," says Dr Sriram—and that's 18 or above for most.

Options and myths abound. Mahua Chatterjee, head, sales and customer service, dermatology, VLCC Group, says waxing is the most suitable method as it has no harmful effect if done hygienically (using disposable strips). But for young and sensitive skin, doctors advise against it. And no, it can't "reduce" hair growth, nor can tweezing and epilators.

Hair removal cream can darken and irritate skin, so both beauty professionals and doctors advise against it. Shaving may not damage skin but leaves a stubble that can trouble self-conscious adolescents (see *Know*, below). Laser can be a permanent method of hair reduction (note that the premise is not one of zero growth), but it is only advised after 18 years.

Spot treatment Acne is another common complaint among adolescents, who

THE DOCTORS' GUIDELINES

- Gentle body lotions or moisturizers are okay at all ages.
- Young skin is vulnerable, so avoid sun exposure as a good sunscreen.
- Deodorants and perfumes for both sexes (again, try to find a gentle formula; avoid alcohol and parabens) can start at 12-13 years as sweat gets thicker during puberty.
- Waxing is widely thought to be gentler than shaving or depilatory creams, but is not advised for sensitive skin (which teenagers often have; acne medications can also make skin sensitive). Those with diabetes or poor blood circulation should also avoid waxing.
- Secondary hair growth starts at around 15. Trimming of armpit or pubic hair can start at 16, shaving only at 18. Don't start shaving earlier, give hormones (and hence hair growth patterns) a chance to settle down first.
- Avoid hair removal creams. At most, a gentle one can be used on a special occasion after a patch test.
- Leg waxing should start only after 14-15 years, arm waxing only after 16.

- Skin is softer and hair thinner than that of older people.
- Those with varicose veins (or a genetic predisposition to them) should avoid this entirely.
- Laser hair reduction treatments must wait till 18.
- Facials should be done only after 18 (until then skin hasn't settled into oily, dry or combination categories, which treatment regimes tailored to).
- Facials and deep cleansing too early spot skin texture for life. Some therapists advise waiting as long as 21.
- Gentle facial bleaches are okay after 15, as they only affect the superficial layer of skin and hair.
- For manicures and pedicures too, wait until 18.
- Nail polish is okay at any age, but be aware of potential irritants.
- Lipsticks and other colour cosmetics are strictly grown-up stuff.

Source: Sneha Agarwal, consultant dermatologist, New Delhi; Snehal Sriram, head, medical services, Kaya Skin Clinic, Mumbai; Ajita Bagal, consultant dermatologist, Max Healthcare, New Delhi

Tress tints

Chemicals in hair dyes can lead to severe allergic reactions. Also, hair colour, perms and ammonia bleach make hair dry, tender, fragile and prone to breakage. Is it worth it? Adults can ask themselves the same question too.

Take off the tints

Dr Bagal treats many young girls, with nickel and cobalt dermatitis caused by wearing artificial jewellery. It is treatable, but it is best to stop wearing junk jewellery.

Tattoo trauma

Doctors suggest children opt for temporary tattoos. Quite apart from the problem of changing your mind too late, it's less risky. The ink in permanent tattoos can lead to skin irritation or allergies. However, taking into account the current craze and peer pressure, dermatologists suggest taking proper precautions. Hygiene is critical, says Dr Sriram. Equipment must be disposable or properly sterilized. Always do a pipitick test first: wait 24 hours for reactions before going ahead.

The beauty of self-esteem

Children should be made to understand, even professionally counselled if need be, that while looking good is important, overall personality development is more crucial, says Dr Chatterjee.

Kavita Deogan also contributed to this story.

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SALONS SAY...

Here is what some salon professionals have to say for younger clients. But can a salon be trusted to offer unbiased advice, especially if it means turning clients away?

- Children can have body wraps, oil massages or head packs from 11 years.
- Steam, shower and jacuzzi sessions should be shorter if it's okay for an adult to steam for 20 minutes, a child should only be allowed 5 minutes.
- Men-facials using natural products (fruits, vegetables, herbs) are okay for pre-teens. Full-fledged facials—peels, serums, glycolic acid or retinol

treatments, dermabrasion, radio frequency, and intensive pulse light (IPL)—are not advisable. Some therapists advise clients to wait until 23.
- Waxing is the gentlest hair removal method, suitable for all.
- Manicures/pedicures are a must for children as hygiene must be taught early. Boys especially need to be taught that dirty toenails are not cool.

Source: Rema Devi, Thai Saba Wellness Spa, Bangalore; Sabrina Hougard, vice-president (operations), Serena Spa, New Delhi

to deal with it through cosmetics and beauty treatments. Instead, visit a dermatologist and take medication, if advised. Hormones can make you acne-prone, but the inflammation is caused by bacteria and not just oil glands. So it is important to keep skin clean, says Dr Chatterjee. Even home remedies and herbal treatments such as fuller's earth and sandalwood paste must be allergy-tested first.

Source: Sneha Agarwal, consultant dermatologist, New Delhi; Snehal Sriram, head, medical services, Kaya Skin Clinic, Mumbai; Ajita Bagal, consultant dermatologist, Max Healthcare, New Delhi