

Benzoin **a safe preservative or not?** by Martin Watt

In 1992 RIFM, the world's leading experts in safety issues of all aromatic extracts, issued new guidelines on the use of Benzoin extracts in cosmetic products.

They recommended that only extracts processed by methods which eliminated allergens should be used in cosmetic products. **This was done because of the numerous recorded cases of benzoin sensitisation.**

This recommendation left major loopholes through which dangerous extracts of benzoin could slip:

- Only large cosmetics suppliers test their products for their potential skin problems.
- In Europe, all cosmetic type agents must undergo full safety evaluation by law. This is rarely enforced by several leading countries, and even in the UK, small producers often do not comply.
- In the USA and Canada, there are hundreds of home producers who are ignorant of safety issues and seem to think anything natural is safe!!
- Smaller suppliers do not do proper safety evaluations.
- Smaller suppliers do not have a clue as to whether the benzoin they purchase is allergen free or not.
- Many aromatherapists are still trained to use this dangerous substance.

THE CRUDER THE BENZOIN, THE MORE POTENTIAL TO CAUSE SENSITISATION.

Some Styrax/benzoin resins may be safe, but no one has yet overcome the problem of knowing if what is in that little bottle is from the safer resins. No aromatherapy supplier can be sure that what their supplier has sold them is what they declare it to be.

Additionally, so called "benzoin oil" most times contains a whole range of powerful chemical solvents to make it pourable. This can include potentially carcinogenic chemicals. The crude powder is of course free of those solvents, but who knows what the heck the variety is being used, and this will contain all of the allergens.

Anyone involved in product safety assessment should be familiar with RIFM guidelines, if they are not familiar with them then **they are not a competent product assessor.**

It may be that the use of low levels of benzoin in soap to prevent rancidity in the fats used is OK. However, RIFM do not make this distinction in relation to benzoin and their advice does cover soaps and detergents.

Any small suppliers who claim their 1000 or so customers have NOT had any problems are badly misleading people with such statements.

This is the same weak argument we hear time and time again in aromatherapy. The fact is they DO NOT KNOW. Unless someone complains of a problem it will not be recorded, and even if someone goes to a dermatologist the problem may never be traced to a particular product or specific supplier.

Neither small soap makers or the aromatherapy trade have any system of reporting adverse reactions to a centralised data gathering resource. Only with such a system can any kind of assessment be made of problems occurring with products. One person in 1000 getting sensitised is far too high.

Other uses of Benzoin:

The fact that benzoic acid is a permitted food additive has absolutely nothing to do with the use of crude grades of benzoin resin. Crude benzoin resin will contain traces of hundreds of natural chemicals both the good ones and the bad ones. The exact chemical/s causing sensitisation may not be known. Incidentally, even benzoic acid is a recognised allergen within dermatology.

The fact that an extract is used safely in food has little relationship to the same extract being used in skin care products. For example a single drop of GENUINE cinnamon bark oil in an apple pie is fine, but it should never ever be used on the skin unless its activity has been modified by other additives.

Increasing incidence of skin reaction problems:

In Europe and doubtless in the USA, there is increasing evidence that a significant number of the population (possibly up to 10%) are becoming sensitised by the use of routine cosmetic and medicated skin applications. Therefore, the fact something has been used for years is without any meaning at all in regard to safety. Many people thought smoking cigarettes was perfectly safe, now look at the results!

The incidence of generalised allergic reactions is rising at a staggering rate throughout the developed world. Part of the causes are of course environmental, but part are almost certainly due to what we put ON and IN our bodies.

People seem to forget that any preservative that has a powerful anti microbial activity is just as likely to kill your skin cells as the microbes. Think about that one!

As a herbalist and essential oils educator, give me a well tried and tested synthetic preservative to a natural one, particularly when the safety of the natural one has not been adequately tested. NATURAL IS NOT INEVITABLY SAFE AS MANY SEEM TO THINK.

Finally for those that do not know, sensitisation is not just an irritation of the skin. **It is an immune system response and can be temporary, but can be with you for LIFE.** Those that become cosmetic ingredient sensitised can have the most appallingly disfiguring skin conditions. I have seen this in a young woman who badly affected on the face because she had applied benzoin oil as advocated in a popular Aromatherapy book.

No one making so-called 'natural' products should ever forget what the results can be if they do not educate themselves properly on safety. Don't think your insurance will cover you, they will opt out as soon as they learn you have manufactured products against the advice of best trade practice.

BENZOIN ESSENTIAL OIL DOES NOT EXIST. IT IS ALWAYS A PROCESSED RESIN, USUALLY CONTAINING SOLVENTS (SOME CAN BE SYNTHETIC). THIS FLIES IN THE FACE OF THE AROMATHERAPY AND NATURAL COSMETICS PHILOSOPHY OF ONLY USING 'NATURAL' EXTRACTS. THE CLAIMS OF ITS HEALING PROPERTIES ARE ANOTHER ISSUE DEALT WITH IN THE NEWSGROUP EMAILS FOLDER.

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