SCENTS AND FRAGRANCES – RISKS AND LABELLING

Perception of scents is strongly related to emotional wellbeing, as well as the opposite. From an evolutionary point of view, for example inducing a flight reaction upon a certain scent was crucial for survival. As a heritage, scents still tend to induce either a positive or negative reaction before we can actually name them.

A SENSE OF WELLBEING

Aromatherapy as an alternative medicine – though controversial – may be one way to take advantage of the positive effects and health benefits that are associated with fragrances and essential oils. The positive effect of scents are strongly marketed as adding to our personal wellbeing and related products such as wellness tea, aromatherapy shampoos, facials and body lotions, fragrance oils and candles are increasingly popular among consumers.

However, it is well known that the incorrect dosage can create a poison and care should be taken to avoid adverse effects. If we look at an example within food production, metabolism and toxicity may be completely different depending on how it is administered, i.e. on either oral intake or inhalation. Diacetyl, an aroma compound naturally found in butter, has been shown to cause bronchiolitis obliterans, a medical condition also known as popcorn worker’s lung, after workers were exposed to high concentrations of airborne diacetyl during popcorn production1,2.

CONTACT ALLERGY RISK

For personal care products, the risk of fragrance related contact allergies are well known. As a consequence, the 7th amendment of directive 76/768/EEC introduced the obligation of labelling for 26 fragrance allergens in 2003. Dependent on their concentration, the fragrance allergens need to be individually listed in the ingredients list of a cosmetic product, just listing them as “perfume” is not sufficient. For so-called leave-on products such as creams and perfumes, fragrance allergens must be listed if their concentrations exceed 10 mg/kg; while the limit is 100 mg/kg for products such as shampoos and soaps that are rinsed off3,4. The same will apply in the new cosmetics regulation (EC) 1223/2009 that will finally come into effect in July 2013.

In order to make a good impression by smelling pleasant we have learnt to relate to “clean” with fragrances. As a result detergents, washing powders and cleaning agents are strongly scented and an increasing number of limited edition products, e.g. washing powders with a spring, summer or Christmas-related scent are found on the market. As such detergents may cause contact allergies when handling them, regulation (EC) 648/2004 on detergents requires the declaration of the 26 fragrance allergens, if they exceed a concentration of 100 mg/kg5.

AIR FRESHENERS AND OTHERS

Regulation on other scents such as room scents and air fresheners is restricted to 19 sensitising allergens that need to be labelled if their concentration exceeds 1,000 mg/kg (0.1%). However, if one allergen is present in concentrations of 10,000 mg/kg (1%) the product needs to carry the danger symbol “irritant”. In this case, the separate labelling of sensitising fragrance compounds present in concentrations below 10,000 mg/kg may be omitted6,7.

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3 Directive 76/768 of the European Parliament and of the Council relating to cosmetic products