How to tell the difference between real henna and imitation “henna”

Vendors using imitation henna are sometimes ignorant to the dangers. The product they bought may be labeled with claims of being natural or organic. Unfortunately, current US legal loopholes allow these companies to print whatever they like on the labels since the products are imported from outside the country. Consumers are currently left to determine on their own whether the product is safe.

Imitation "henna" is frequently found in destination spots frequented by tourists or by semi-professional artists (experienced, but no business license or insurance). So, if you find yourself wanting henna while on vacation or simply away from a henna artist you know and trust, use these tips to avoid the dangerous stuff:

CERTIFICATION – The #1 way to ensure a safe and fun experience is to get your henna from an ICNHA-certified artist. Check the list here: www.icnha.org and click “Members”

SCENT – Real henna smells GOOD! Alone, it smells grassy or like hay. Usually, it's blended with essential oils which will smell wonderful. Frequently used oils are cajeput, tea tree and eucalyptus which all have a similar spicy/medicinal scent, and other oils may be added to enhance the smell as well. Imitation products will have a strong, unpleasant odor and will often smell like hair dye.

PACKAGING – Real henna is homemade by henna artists. Factories that make imitation products will package them in cones or tubes covered with pictures and fancy text. These are never safe – avoid these. Unfortunately you can’t always rely on the packaging, because some artists are now repackaging the imitation products into homemade cones/tubes. 😞

AFTERCARE – Real henna needs to be left on the skin for 4+ hours in order to stain the skin effectively. Then, it takes about 48 hours to darken. Imitation "henna" is often called "instant henna" or "emergency henna" (regardless of any claims of it being natural on the label) because it only needs to be on the skin for 30 minutes or less, and the stain is dark immediately.

INGREDIENTS – Ask the artist to tell you the ingredients in their mix. They should have mixed it themselves, or have purchased it from another henna artist. Either way they should be able to disclose a complete ingredients list for you.