

Nearly 80% of hair products for black women contain cancer chemicals

BY TOBY MURPHY ON APRIL 27, 2018HEALTH

Nearly 80 percent of hair products aimed at black women contain chemicals linked to cancer, infertility and obesity, new research suggests.

Up to 78 percent of relaxers, which are used to permanently straighten hair, contain hormone-disrupting chemicals, known as parabens, a US study found.

Past studies suggest parabens, which are used as preservatives, mimic oestrogen and may cause cancer, weight gain and reduced muscle mass.

Up to 78 percent of hair products, including leave-in conditioners, also contain phthalates, the research adds.

Phthalates are added to prolong products' shelf lives and have been linked to breast and ovarian cancer, as well as early menopause.

Out of the 18 products analyzed, 11 contain chemicals that are banned under the EU cosmetic regulations due to their links to cancer and female infertility.

Previous research suggests black women are more likely to use straightening and moisturising hair products to try and meet social beauty norms.

Results further suggest that hair products aimed at black women contain up to 45 hormone-disrupting chemicals, which are not generally listed on their labels.

All of the products contain at least one fragrance, which have previously been described as 'gender benders' due to them encouraging male-breast growth.

The worst offenders were found in hair lotions, root stimulators and relaxers.

Lotions claim moisturize, while root stimulators are thought to encourage hair growth and strength.

Lead author Dr Jessica Helm, from the Silent Spring Institute, Massachusetts, said: 'Chemicals in hair products, and beauty products in general, are mostly untested and largely unregulated.'

Janette Robinson Flint, from the nonprofit organization Black Women for Wellness, added: 'Black women are over-exposed and under-protected from toxic chemicals.'

'This study is evidence that hair products are an important source of toxic chemicals and that we need to remove these risks to protect black women's lives and prevent harm.'

The researchers hope their findings will lead to clearer ingredient labeling on products.

They also encourage hair-product manufacturers to make safer cosmetics.

In the meantime, the scientists advise people reduce their chemical exposure by looking for products that are paraben and fragrance free.

People should also choose plant-based or organic products, they add.



The researchers analyzed 18 hair products marketed towards black women.

These products were made up of hot-oil treatments, anti-frizz polishes, leave-in conditioners, root stimulators, hair lotions and relaxers.

The aforementioned products were chosen based on a 2005 survey of 301 women living in New York. The survey's black participants, which made up more than half of the total, used these six products most frequently.

The researchers tested the products for 66 chemicals.

The findings were published in the journal *Environmental Research*.

Beauty standards are literally toxic for women of color

Personal care products can poison you, and women of color take on extra burdens.
By Kendra Pierre-Louis August 16, 2017

Women of color have higher levels of cosmetic-related chemicals in their bodies compared to white women.

“Dry, lifeless hair can take the fun out of your life,” intones an announcer in a 1950s ad for the haircare product Brylcreem, “but you can put it back with Brylcreem—with Brylcreem, a little dab will do you.” The ad might seem a little rough by 2017 sensibilities, but some 60 years later we’re still attracted to the shine promised by cosmetics and personal care products. Toothpaste companies pledge that they’ll give us blindingly white smiles, while deodorant manufacturers dangle the hope of a life without stink. The advertisements that we see and the products we buy help determine and reinforce what we view as normal.

These days, the average man uses five to seven personal care products and cosmetics, while the average woman uses around 9 to 12 (17, if she’s a teenager). While this might seem normal (body wash, shampoo, conditioner, deodorant, and lotion add up quickly), our daily habits expose us to a dizzying number of chemicals.

And in recent years, environmental toxicologists have started to suspect—and in some cases, even confirm—that a few may be harmful to human health and wellbeing.

Personal care products include chemicals like parabens, which are thought to interfere with the body's hormonal processes because they mimic estrogen. They also include phthalates, some of which, studies have shown, interfere with the reproductive processes of lab animals. And then there are all the added fragrances, a particularly opaque category that includes chemicals linked to everything from reproductive dysfunction to cancer.

Studies suggest that the average white American woman exposes herself to 168 personal care chemicals a day, seven days a week. If that sounds like a lot, researchers in a commentary released today in the journal *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* suggest that the cumulative toxic burden for American women of color is even *higher*.

“A lot of people assume that if they're buying something from the store, that it's been thoroughly vetted for health and safety concerns,” Ami Zota, lead author on the commentary and an environmental and occupational health researcher at The Milken Institute of Public Health at George Washington University told *Popular Science*. “However, that's not really the case with cosmetics.”

As bad as exposure risks are for white Americans, Zota found that exposure for women of color is even worse—likely because of pressures to conform to beauty standards based on more European characteristics. This wouldn't necessarily be problematic, from a toxicological perspective, if we were talking about fashion norms (anyone feel like bringing the dirndl back?), but the beauty standards in question—such as lighter skin and straighter, less coiled hair—are much more dangerous to achieve. To do so, women of color must expose themselves to an additional battery of chemicals that white women do not. The end result is that women of color have higher levels of beauty-related environmental chemicals in their body, irrespective of socio-economic status. And it's not just driven by vanity.

“There is a good amount of data coming out of the social science literature that says that lighter skin and straighter hair actually has real material consequences for women of color,” says co-author Bhavna Shamasunder, an assistant professor of Urban and Environmental Policy at Occidental College in Los Angeles. “They have more upwardly mobile careers, they make more money.”

Skin bleaching creams frequently contain especially harmful chemicals.

The pressure for black women in particular to straighten their hair is immense. The "Good Hair Study" conducted earlier this year by the Perception Institute found that black women's natural hair was rated as “less attractive” and “less professional” than when it was straightened. Earlier this year, a Boston area school received national attention when it suspended black students for wearing their hair in braids—students who had their hair chemically straightened, however, were fine. Similarly, reports of black women being fired for having natural hair are not uncommon.

For many black women, hair grows up and out—not flat and down. Adhering to European hair standards requires many hours with a straightening iron, not to mention the inability to sweat, ever forget an umbrella, or go swimming.

The alternative are chemical relaxers, which include compounds that affect reproductive pathways. In the quest for straight hair, children as young as four years old are exposed to chemical relaxers that studies have shown lead to early puberty, uterine fibroids, and an increased risk of pre-menopausal breast cancer.

That's a huge risk for the sake of straight hair, and it's not the only one that women of color take on. The most stunning hazard of all is arguably mercury exposure.

Women of child bearing age know that they're supposed to limit consumption of fatty fish such as tuna because it can contain mercury, which at even modest levels can damage the brains and nervous systems of developing fetuses. At the extreme end, mercury exposure while in utero can lead a child to be born with cerebral palsy. And yet, one study of a pregnant Mexican American woman found that her blood contained 15 micrograms per liter of mercury, or three times above the level at which doctors are required to notify the Centers for Disease Control. When researchers traced the woman's exposure back to its source, it wasn't a serious sushi habit she had to blame. Two jars of face cream that a relative had given her from Mexico were behind her troubling mercury exposure. They contained, respectively, 21,000 ppm and 30,000 ppm of mercury. United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) guidelines limit the amount of mercury in cosmetics to just 1ppm.

Mercury is a common ingredient in skin lightening creams, products designed to lighten one's skin by several shades. In fact, its use dates back to the 1900s because it does indeed lighten skin. But mercury isn't just dangerous if you're pregnant. It can cause speech, hearing, and walking problems. To make matters worse, it's not easy to tell if a product contains mercury, because many are imported from countries with different regulations.

Even products made domestically aren't great at disclosing what's in them, and mercury isn't the only chemical in skin whitening creams that poses a problem. Hydroquinone, especially in high doses, is linked to skin cancer. And skin lightening products are a common cosmetic purchase for women of color.

"I knew skin lightening products were huge in India and I also knew from my prior work that Mexican American women tend to use them a lot, as well as women from the Caribbean and in the U.S.," says Zota. "But we found one recent study that had surveyed approximately 20,000 university students over 10 different countries across the world. And in Africa, in Asia, South and East Asia, all of the Americas, they found that 33 percent of college age women reported recently using skin whitening cosmetics. It further underscored the widespread use of these types of cosmetics."

To get women of color to buy these products, companies use images and language that devalue darker skin and qualify lighter skin. A 2011 study examining the images and packaging on skin bleaching products sold in Harlem, a historically African American neighborhood, found that the packages claimed bleaching would make skin healthy, soft, and glowingly beautiful. That's pretty ironic, given that many of the products are linked to skin cancer and other diseases. In other words, some companies are profiting off of not only making women of color insecure, but potentially making them sick. Which is why Zota says that her goal in this commentary, "Is to raise more awareness generally about toxic environmental chemicals in beauty products. And how some of the products that are most commonly used by women of color are often some of the most hazardous to our health."

Women of color are more likely to live in polluted communities adding an additional layer of environmental burdens.

One other important factor is environmental racism, or the tendency for governments to enable businesses such as dumps, power plants, and chemical plants to seek out communities of color when building facilities. Women of color are far more likely than white women to live in polluted neighborhoods. The chemical burden they take on in pursuit of racist standards of beauty is compounded by the very air they breathe.

Zota hopes that increased recognition of the role that personal care products and cosmetics plays in the health of women of color will finally put the problem on the medical radar, and ideally lead to better policies. "We need a better characterization of all of the products that are being marketed out there," says Zota. "What do they

contain? We don't even have that information. Companies don't even have to register their products with the FDA to introduce them to the marketplace.”

In the short term, she hopes that awareness can empower women of color to protect themselves—and to demand better products. Using fewer cosmetics and personal care items is a good place to start, Zota says, and consumers should look out for products containing fewer chemicals of concern. It’s not always easy to figure out which items are actually less benign, especially thanks to recent trends in what you might call “natural washing.” Since “natural” isn’t actually a regulated term, companies can (and do) slap the word onto products that contain harmful substances. The best bet is to check cosmetics databases that list ingredients. But both Zota and Shamasunder say that beauty standards themselves need to evolve, too. Women of color shouldn’t have to bleach their skin or straighten their hair to fit outmoded standards of beauty and “professionalism.” Death shouldn’t be the consequence of seeking social acceptance.

Is Makeup More Toxic For Women Of Color? New Research Says It Could Be

By **JR THORPE**

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Ashley Batz / Bustle

Research has repeatedly indicated that women of color are at great risk of health damage from their cosmetic use, because the products that are marketed to them specifically often contain chemicals that can adversely affect health. A recent study in the *American Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology* has highlighted the issue again, drawing attention to the specific racial divides in beauty product use, and how women of color find themselves particularly badly served by the cosmetics industry.

Cosmetics have contained potentially lethal compounds for an incredibly long time. From lead-based face paint popular among European women from the 16th through 19th centuries, to arsenic-based skincare regimes in the 1800s, toxic chemicals were found in the beauty regimes of the 1 percent. Nowadays, organic, toxin-free skincare is placed at a high value, and marketed — as the arsenic-laced regimes of the past once were — to wealthy, white women. Meanwhile, poor women of color have less access to this type of product, and the products that *are* marketed for them often contain chemicals that lead to serious health concerns. Beth Conway of the health nonprofit Women's Voices For The Earth, which focuses on how toxic environments impact women, tells Bustle, “Many products marketed to women of color, such as skin lighteners, hair relaxers and dyes, contain some of the most toxic chemicals on the market, which are known cancer-causing agents.” So why are products targeted to non-white women so toxic, and what does it reveal about the way we market and use cosmetics?

The Big Problems: Skin, Hair & Perfume



Cosmetics specifically marketed to women of color are becoming big business, after years of mainstream beauty companies ignoring the needs of women of color; witness the excitement over the Rihanna's Fenty Beauty range with 40 different foundation shades, the darkest of which have now sold out. Women of color are enthusiastic consumers of cosmetics, but it's increasingly known that the ingredients found in some products might hurt them.

The research in *AJOG* highlights the three areas of beauty products that place women of color at greatest risk, as well as the consequences of using them. Skin-lightening products are one of the greatest culprits, particularly for Asian women, who, as the scientists point out, spend 70 percent more than the national average on skin care. Skin-lightening creams have been at the center for a storm for a long time, and not only for the fact that they impose racist ideas about skin color on women of color worldwide. The FDA has warned against their use because of the strong likelihood that they might contain mercury. Many of these types of products are produced overseas and sold in the United States without proper permits. However, the *AJOG* scientists point out that mercury isn't the only issue, though it is the most serious. Skin-lightening creams can also contain hydroquinone and topical corticosteroids, which are technically only meant to treat skin conditions like eczema.

The other area of cosmetics marketed almost exclusively to women of color, particularly African American women, is hair straighteners and relaxers. Black women are around three times more likely than white women to experience uterine fibroids, and some research indicates that the chronic use of relaxers appears to be part of the cause. Relaxers contain hormonal disrupters such as parabens and the chemical placenta, and exposure to them over a lifetime, through small burns as they're administered to the scalp, may contribute to a range of gynecological issues. Conway tells *Bustle*, "One study showed that chemicals in hair straighteners may absorb into the scalp, and that the greatest users of these straighteners are African-American women who generally have a treatment every four to eight weeks." Use of relaxers and hair treatments has been linked to fibroids, but also to early menstruation and puberty, and higher rates of breast cancer tumors among Black women.

Even they aren't marketed specifically to women of color, though, cosmetics use can still hurt. The other area that the new research highlights is fragrance, particularly in products used for vaginal 'freshness' and intimate care, like douches and talcum powder.

The Campaign for Safe Cosmetics notes that Procter & Gamble has found that 22.5 percent of Black women choose a product based on fragrance, and that fragrance is also important for Latinx women. That turns into a problem, unfortunately, when the fragrances themselves prove dangerous. Fragranced douches and wipes often have high proportions of diethyl phthalate, part of a class of chemicals called phthalates which have high levels of adverse health effects. Douches themselves are poor practice for vaginal health, disturbing the pH imbalance within the vagina and creating higher risk of infection, but using scented versions of these products can cause additional poor health outcomes.

Why Is This Happening?

Part of the problem in the United States is with cosmetics regulation itself. Despite what you might think, the FDA doesn't have great power over the composition of cosmetics — they don't test cosmetics before they go onto the market. Companies bear the bulk of safety testing because, for obvious reasons, they don't want to get sued — and if their product has problems, the FDA can only recommend a recall. "There is a real problem with the regulation of cosmetics in the United States," Conway says. "The current system for cosmetics regulation was put in place over 75 years ago and, not surprisingly, a lot has changed in the cosmetics and salon products industry since the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act was passed in 1938." She points out that there's currently federal legislation, the Personal Care Products Act, that's trying to fix the problem, but it doesn't go far enough.

But for women of color, the issue goes deeper than toxic chemicals; it also harkens back to long-held racist ideals. The AJOG scientists point out that particularly toxic chemical usage comes hand in hand with products marketed specifically to the behaviors, worries and racism-induced beliefs of non-white women, and for many of them, the consequences of using toxic products are a risk worth taking. Skin-lightening creams are used because of pervasive beliefs exist across Africa and Asia about the heightened attractiveness and marriageability of lighter-skinned women. "The imagined odor of African American women was used historically as a basis for moral judgement and an attempt to control sexual behavior," the AJOG scientists explain, and link it directly to the fact that in the United States, African American women are much more likely than white women to use fragranced talc to mask normal vaginal smell, a practice that has recently been linked to cancer. Using hair relaxers to 'tame' natural hair ties into racist notions about presentability and professionalism that hinder Black women's ability to access and advance in white collar occupations.

“There is a good amount of data coming out of the social science literature that says that lighter skin and straighter hair actually has real material consequences for women of color,” co-author Bhavna Shamasunder told *Popular Science*. This data demonstrates an unfortunate fact of life of living in a society that has traditionally valued white, European traits and features.

One wonders: Would these products be allowed onto worldwide markets with such little regulation — and such poor health outcomes — if they were marketed to white women instead? It's a difficult question to answer. But it's worth remembering that studies have repeatedly reiterated the fact of the comparative invisibility of women of color, in textbooks, in social situations, in corporate settings, in the media, and across cultural and academic platforms. So it's not a stretch to argue that their health concerns are seen, consciously or unconsciously, as less of a concern to authorities.

So what can women do to protect themselves from these products? "The presence of potentially toxic chemicals in beauty products is a challenging public health problem that requires action on many different levels," lead author Dr. Ami Zota tells *Bustle*. She did, however, have practical suggestions. Beyond stopping the use of potentially harmful products, she said, women of color can educate themselves. If you're concerned, she said, "use online available tools such as the EWG Skin Deep website to learn more about health and safety concerns of some of their favorite products [and] advocate for safer cosmetics and more health-protective policies through consumer advocacy."

There is a drawback, however, to this method. "Asking women to simply shop their way out of the problem isn't enough," Conway explains. "Toxic chemicals in products isn't about personal choice. The 'buyer beware' approach is failing to protect public health, and it is unacceptable that chemicals linked to cancer, hormone disruption, allergies, fertility issues and more are ending up in the products." Zota tells *Bustle* that one of the most important things women of color can do is "initiate conversations with friends and family about societal beauty norms to help change the upstream factors that are driving product use." Shifting regulations to remove toxicity from the development of these products would be a step in the right direction, but removing the cultural constraints that mean non-white women think it's necessary to be poisoned to be successful would likely be a better one.

