



**MINNESOTA POLLUTION  
CONTROL AGENCY**

## Mercury in Skin Lightening Products

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TMDL Meeting 09/21/2023

- What are skin lightening products?
  - Why is mercury a main ingredient?
  - What are their impacts on human health and the environment?
- How has skin lightening products effected Minnesota?
- Current work and Future Goals

# • Colorism

- Colorism is defined as discrimination that privileges light-skinned people over people with darker skin.



**FAIR AND HANDSOME**  
ADVANCED WHITENING

Introducing  
**INSTANT BOOST FACE CREAM & FACE WASH**

**NEW**

**FAIR AND HANDSOME**  
ADVANCED WHITENING  
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**FAIR AND HANDSOME**  
ADVANCED WHITENING  
INSTANT BOOST FACE WASH

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INSTANT PERFUMED MOISTURIZER  
INSTANT PERFUMED MOISTURIZER  
INSTANT PERFUMED MOISTURIZER

**MEN NEED MORE**

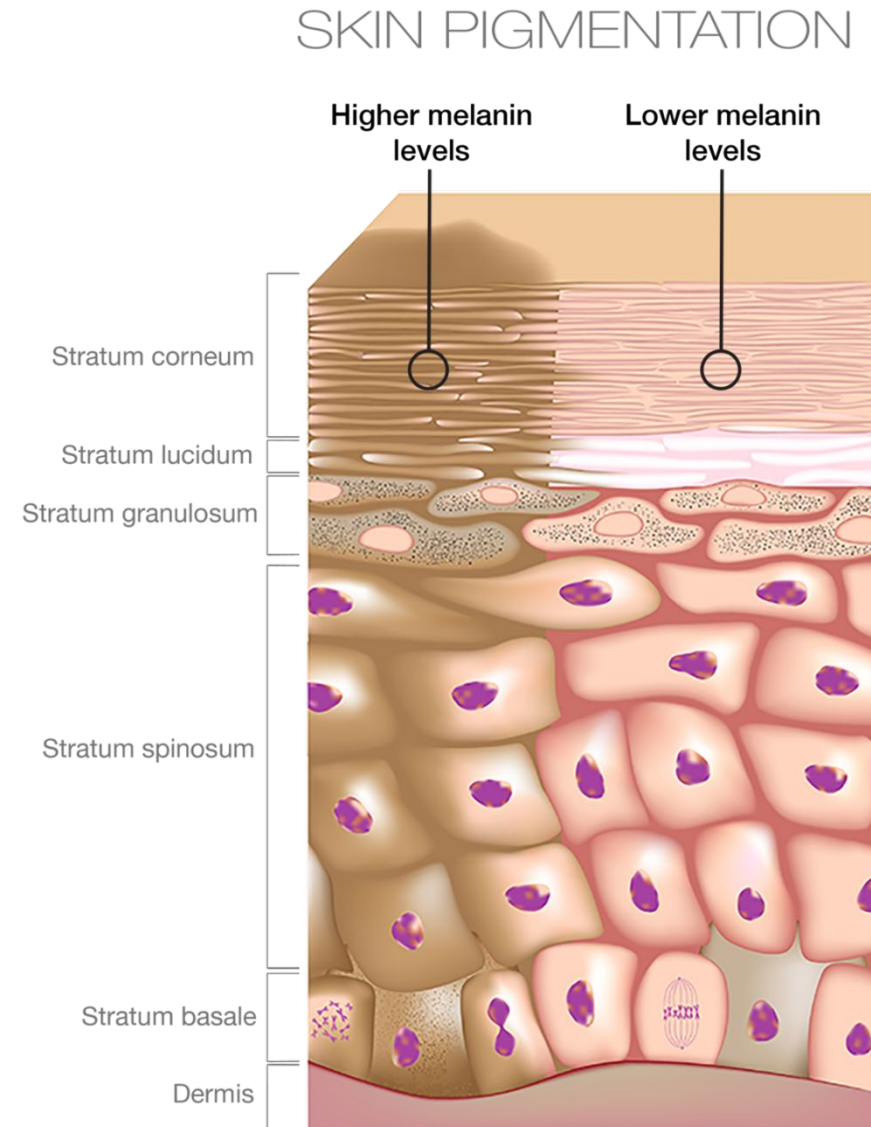


# Skin Lightening Products



# Why Mercury?

- Mercury Salts inhibits the formation of Melanin, resulting in lighter skin tone
- Effective
- Cheap



# Exposure pathways



- Dermal absorption
- Ingestion
- Inhalation

# Impact on Human Health

- Mercury can damage
  - Nervous system
  - Kidneys
  - Skin by causing rashes and blotchy spots
  - Give a grayish color



# Impact on the Environment

Skin Lightening Products end up in Landfill

- Air
- Soil
- Water

Posing a threat to human and wildlife health

# 2008 Ban on Mercury in Cosmetics

MN State Statutes **116.92 Mercury Emissions: Reduction**

**Sub division 8i. Ban; mercury in Cosmetics, toiletries, and fragrances**

After January 1, 2008 a person may not sell, offer for sale, or distribute in the state a cosmetic, toiletry, or fragrance product containing mercury.

## MN FEET Study: Community Report



Mercury, lead and cadmium are chemicals in our environment that can harm people's health. When women are pregnant, these chemicals can affect babies' brain development. Minnesota Family Environmental Exposure Tracking (MN FEET) was a study with the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH), HealthPartners Institute and SoLaHmo Partnership for Health & Wellness at Minnesota Community Care (formerly known as West Side Community Health Services). We measured these chemicals in women and their newborn babies to learn more about how to protect families from these chemicals.

### About MN FEET

We asked pregnant women who planned to give birth at Regions Hospital or Abbott Northwestern Hospital to be in the study. Women were from Asian, East African, Latino and White communities. We asked women from these groups because of communities' concerns and information from other studies that they may have more of these chemicals in their bodies than women from other communities. Seventy percent of all the women we asked agreed to be in the study. Some ethnic groups had more women in the study than others.

Women who agreed to join the study answered phone survey questions. Then, when they had their babies, they gave a urine sample and a small amount of blood from their baby's umbilical cord. Blood and urine samples were tested by the MDH Public Health Laboratory.

#### Women in MN FEET

- 779 women answered survey questions: 323 Latina women, 226 White women, 145 Asian women, 85 East African women.
- 408 women gave blood and/or urine samples: 156 Latina women, 141 White women, 83 Asian women, 28 East African women.
- Over half (63%) lived in Ramsey County. Women were from 11 different Minnesota counties.
- 98% of Latina women, 36% of East African women and 20% of Asian women answered their survey questions in a language other than English.

MN FEET study found some pregnant Asian and Latina women had elevated levels of mercury in urine, likely linked with skin lightening products

Skin-Lightening Practices and Mercury Exposure in the Somali Community

BY AMIRA ADAWE AND CHARLES OBERG, M.D., M.P.H.

Editor's note: This story is part of '[White lies](#)', a series by CNN's As Equals, investigating skin whitening practices worldwide to expose the underlying drivers of colorism, the industry that profits from it and the cost to individuals and communities. For information about how CNN As Equals is funded and more, check out our [FAQs](#).

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A woman in Minnesota lost part of her vision and inadvertently put her entire household at risk of mercury poisoning, most likely from using beauty creams containing high levels of the toxic chemical, according to a case report shared exclusively with CNN.

The report, shared by Dr. Erin Batdorff with the Minnesota Poison Control System, details the extensive symptoms experienced by the woman, also a mother, and how home visits conducted by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) found high levels of mercury in her children's bedrooms, bedding, household towels and laundry area.

# Minnesota Cooperation

- MPCA
  - Testing and Enforcement
  - Outreach and Education to Sellers
  - Home Visits
- MDH
  - Testing of Minnesotans
  - Outreach and Education to Minnesotans and Providers
- Department of Commerce
- Local Public Health – Home Visits
- Local Household Hazardous Waste – Proper disposal

# MDH educational handout

## CHOOSE HEALTH, AVOID SKIN LIGHTENING



Some skin lightening products have **mercury** in them and are not healthy. They are **poisonous**. Mercury cannot be seen, felt, smelled or tasted, and often the skin product ingredient list is not complete.

### HEALTHY TIPS

- Know what's in your skin products
- Protect your skin with safe sunscreen
- Keep your skin moisturized and hydrated

### PROTECT

#### YOUR BABY



When breastfeeding, your baby takes in anything that is on your skin.

#### YOURSELF



Mercury from skin products is absorbed through your skin.

#### YOUR HOME



Using these products puts mercury into the air you and your family breathe.



Front

Back

## MANY SKIN LIGHTENING PRODUCTS CONTAIN MERCURY. DO NOT BUY OR USE.

This is not a complete list. Many products tested in Minnesota had mercury and/or other chemicals. For more examples visit [health.state.mn.us/topics/skin](http://health.state.mn.us/topics/skin)



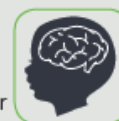
### STOP USING IT NOW

If you have been using a product with mercury, stop using it now. Your body will naturally get rid of the mercury over time.



**mn DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH**  
625 Robert St. North  
PO Box 64975  
St. Paul, MN 55164-0975  
To obtain this information in a different format, call 651-201-4899. REV 05/2018

Mercury can affect memory, thinking, attention and success in school for babies and children.



People who use skin lightening products can have kidney or nervous system problems and develop pain and rashes.



### KNOW WHERE TO THROW

Do not throw harmful skin products in the trash. It can harm others if it gets into the environment. Take the skin product to a household hazardous waste site. Find your local hazardous waste site at [pca.state.mn.us](http://pca.state.mn.us)



- Search and Seizure at Hmong Town and Hmong Village in 2016 & 2018
  - 4.5 tons of products sent to Household Hazardous Waste facilities
  - Start of Minnesota's Product Database (MDH website)
  - Citations issued
- 2019 State of MN provided Grants
  - Education and outreach into communities
  - Minneapolis Public Health Buy back program - 864 containers (approximately \$10k)
    - Vendors agreed to not sell products
- 2023 Meeting with Major online Platforms
  - Pipeline to getting products off their website

# National Cooperation

- MPCA and Minnesota Department of Health partners:
  - California Department of Public Health
  - New York City Department of Health

## Collaboration topics:

- Public outreach and education
- Enforcement
- Product testing



# International Cooperation

- Zero Mercury Working Group (Coalition of Worldwide Civil Society Organizations)
  - Testing and releasing of product information
    - Focus is ban of sales on major Online platform
    - MPCA has shared product information and work with online platforms with Mercury Policy Project
- United Nation Environment Program Mercury in Products Partnership
  - Project “Eliminating mercury skin lightening products”
    - Governments of Gabon, Jamaica, Sri Lanka
  - World Health Organization is a partner

# Near Future Goals

- Major Online Platforms
  - Monitoring Sellers and Preventing Product Listing
  - Product Testing
    - Share Data with other organizations
  - System to respond when notified of problematic products
- Local Sellers
  - More education for the community
  - Product Testing
  - Screen products
- Ensure proper management of unwanted products
- Continue Mercury in Urine Screening in Children

Questions?  
Thank you!

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