Mercury in Skin Lightening Cosmetics

Background
• Skin-lighteners are sold as creams, lotions or soaps
• Many are approved for sale, but others contain potentially hazardous ingredients
• Mercury found used as an active ingredient; contains between 2 to 10 percent by weight
• Most effective ingredients, including mercury compounds and hydroquinone, are the cheapest
• Hundreds if not thousands are available globally

Skin lighteners used primarily by women
They are heavily marketed to women
Surveys indicate that many women use products for extended periods of time
Readily available on the internet and in some shops

Test Results
• Elevated mercury levels in hair, blood and urine
• Users often have hair mercury levels greater than 100 parts per million (ppm)
• Products tested in Africa, Asia and North America contain from 660 to 57,000 ppm mercury

Recent testing in the U.S. by the Chicago Tribune found mercury in cosmetics in violation of U.S. law, showing continuing use prevalent in developed countries

Health Concerns of Using Products Containing Mercury
• Mercury is rapidly absorbed through the skin and can cause severe health effects
• Long term use can result in kidney damage
• Mercury is also toxic to the nervous system
• Other symptoms include tremors, vertigo, loss of memory and generalized aches and pains
• Long term use often produces a characteristic "slate grey" skin color
• Over pigmented skin (see photo at right) is a common problem among African women
• Research needed on impacts to fetus, babies

What Governments Are Doing
• At the international level, both W.H.O. and UNEP recognize the problem of mercury in skin lightening cosmetics
• Many countries, including those in the EU and the U.S., ban the use of mercury in cosmetic products
• Several national governments, including Kenya and Indonesia, have mounted public education campaigns and banned long lists of specific products

Recommendations
• Cosmetics containing mercury should be banned from global commerce as part of a legally binding treaty on mercury
• W.H.O. and/or UNEP should assess and provide a data base on mercury content of products on the global market and provide regional health alerts and risk communication information to governments to effectively notify affected populations
• To reduce and stop production, national governments should ban the use of mercury in cosmetics and distribute culturally-appropriate materials to inform consumers of risks
• Financial and technical assistance should be provided to developing countries and countries with economies in transition where use of mercury in cosmetics is found to be prevalent
• Non-governmental organizations should work in partnership with national governments and intergovernmental bodies to develop and disseminate consumer education material

Mercury Poisoning from Various Types of Exposure (in Hair Concentrations)*

| Women using mercury in soap | 122.0 mg/kg |
| Amazon fish consumers near gold mining | 75.0 mg/kg |
| Fish consumers in Bolivia | 16.0 mg/kg |
| Seal consumers in Greenland | 15.0 mg/kg |
| Greenland Inuits | 10.0 mg/kg |
| Non-fish consumers in Amazon | 6.0 mg/kg |
| Miners in Lake Victoria | 3.0 mg/kg |
| Danes (average) | 0.6 mg/kg |


Women

Percent who use skin lighteners

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