

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

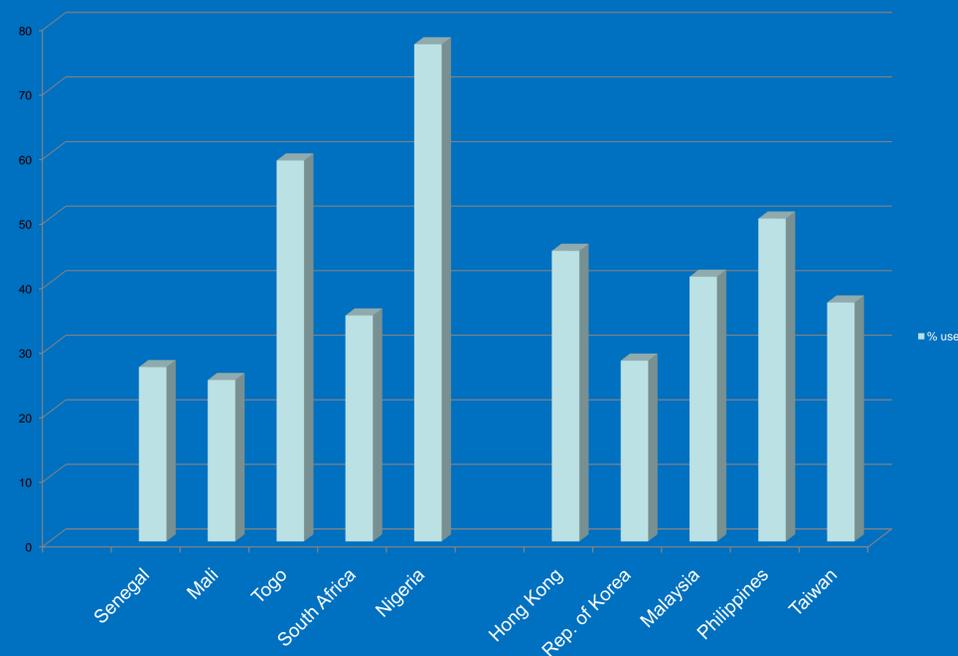
- Mercury is rapidly absorbed through the skin and can cause severe health effects
- Long term use can result in kidney damage
- Mercury is also toxic to the nervous system
- Other symptoms include tremors, vertigo, loss of memory and generalized aches and pains
- Long term use often produces a characteristic "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



Figure 3: Hyperpigmentation associated with hyperpigmentation.



Percent who use skin lighteners



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

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

*Mercury in Soap in Tanzania, NERI Technical Report # 306. 1999

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 provided 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