

Mercury in Skin Lightening Products

FACTSHEET FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC

What is mercury?

Mercury is a naturally occurring element found in rocks, soil, water, air, and living things. Exposure to mercury can cause negative health effects. One form of mercury, called inorganic mercury, is a commonly used ingredient in skin lightening products.

What are skin lightening products?

Skin lightening products are used for the treatment of uneven skin tone, acne, wrinkles, age spots, and freckles. They are also used for skin bleaching/whitening practices with deep roots in colorism, which places higher value and privilege of light-skinned people over dark-skinned people. They can be described as skin whitening, bleaching, brightening, evening, and fading products. The products come in different forms, including creams, powders, deodorants, and soaps. Although sale of mercury-containing products is illegal in Minnesota, they can be purchased online and in some markets.

How can a person be exposed to mercury from skin lightening products?

People can be exposed to mercury from:

- Using the products on your skin or touching household items (towels, clothing, bedding) that have been contaminated.
- Breathing in mercury vapors that come out of products and get into the household air.
- Accidentally swallowing or eating the skin lightening products.

Who is at risk of being exposed?

- Anyone using skin lightening products is at risk of mercury exposure. Because of the pressures of colorism, people from some backgrounds are more likely to use these products.
- Groups at greater risk for health effects from exposure include pregnant people and developing fetuses, infants, and young children.
- Other people living in homes where these products are used can also be exposed.

How do I know which products may contain mercury?

- Be careful with purchasing or using any skin lightening products because they may contain mercury or other harmful chemicals.

MERCURY IN SKIN LIGHTENING PRODUCTS

- Review the product's ingredient list to see if it contains mercury, mercurio, mercuric, mercurous or calomel.
- Not all skin lightening products may accurately share mercury content so avoid using products that you cannot verify are safe.
- Mercury in skin lightening products cannot be seen, felt, smelled, or tasted.
- MDH and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency occasionally test products for mercury. [Skin Lightening Products Found to Contain Mercury, Hydroquinone and/or Steroids \(PDF\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/environment/skin/docs/testedprds.pdf) (<https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/environment/skin/docs/testedprds.pdf>) identifies products found to have mercury in them. This is not a comprehensive list and products not listed may or may not contain mercury.
- What are the health effects of exposure to mercury from skin lightening products?

Exposure to inorganic mercury in skin lightening products can cause:

- Skin issues, including rash and discoloration.
- Kidney problems, including uremia and nephrotic syndrome.
- Neurological problems, including anxiety, irritability, tremors, memory loss, depression, weight loss, fatigue, and numbness.

What should I do if I have a product that may contain mercury?

- Stop using the product.
- Do not throw it in the trash or dispose of it in the toilet or sink. If it has mercury in it, it can harm others if it gets into the environment. Take the product to your local household hazardous waste site. Check with your local county website to find a site for safe disposal.
- If you would like to have a product tested, contact one of these staff people at the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency:
 - John Gilkeson, john.gilkeson@state.mn.us or 651-757-2391or
 - Michael Xiong, michael.xiong@state.mn.us or 651-757-2079.

What should I do if I'm worried that I've had a mercury exposure from skin lightening products?

- Contact your health care provider and ask for a urine mercury test to see if you have elevated exposure. Testing can tell you about the level of exposure but cannot provide information about the source of exposure. Visit [Urine Mercury Testing](https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/environment/skin/urinemer.html) (<https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/environment/skin/urinemer.html>) for more information about urine mercury testing.

Additional Resources

- Visit [Skin Lightening Products can cause Health Problems \(https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/environment/skin/gpfs.html\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/environment/skin/gpfs.html) for short informational sheets in English, Somali, Spanish, Hmong, Karen, Oromo, Amharic, and Tigrinya and product testing list.
- To learn more about household hazardous waste, visit Minnesota Pollution Control Agency website: [Safely dispose of household hazardous waste\(https://www.pca.state.mn.us/news-and-stories/safely-dispose-of-household-hazardous-waste\)](https://www.pca.state.mn.us/news-and-stories/safely-dispose-of-household-hazardous-waste).
- For general questions about urine mercury testing, exposure concerns, or home visits, contact the Minnesota Department of Health at 651-201-4899 or health.risk@state.mn.us.
- If you or someone in your household has symptoms from using a product containing mercury, call Minnesota Poison Control at 800-222-1222.

Minnesota Department of Health
Environmental Surveillance and Assessment (ESA) Section
651-201-4899
health.risk@state.mn.us
www.health.state.mn.us

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