

## Minnesota Department of Health

# Skin lightening products can cause health problems

*Recent tests in Minnesota show that some skin lightening products have dangerous levels of mercury. Being exposed to the mercury in these products could cause serious health problems.*

### Background

In May 2011 the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) tested a random sample of skin lightening products and found that some of them contain mercury at levels much higher than what the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) allows in cosmetic products.

The FDA allows cosmetic products to contain only trace amounts of mercury (one part per million). The products MDH tested ranged from 135 to 33,000 parts per million.

Being exposed to mercury from these products could cause serious health problems.

Skin lightening products (also called skin brightening or fade products) are used by both dark and light-skinned individuals to lighten skin tone, fade freckles, or get rid of age spots. These products can be purchased in a broad range of stores across Minnesota including those serving African, Asian, Middle Eastern and Latino communities.

### Should I be concerned?

People who use skin products containing mercury have been found to have elevated mercury levels in their hair, blood, and urine. Mercury can damage the kidneys, affect the nervous system, or cause pain or rashes.

Pregnant women and women of child-bearing age should avoid exposure to mercury. Unborn babies, infants, and children are very sensitive to mercury.

Even when pregnant women do not show symptoms of mercury exposure, it can affect their unborn children.

### How do I know if a product contains mercury?

- Check the label. If it does not list the ingredients of the product, stop using it.
- If the label says the product has mercury in it (also known as “calomel,” “mercuric,” “mercurous,” or “mercurio”), stop using it.

### What should I do?

- If you have been using a product that may have mercury in it, **stop using it now**. Your body will naturally get rid of the mercury over time.
- Do not throw the product in the trash. If it has mercury in it, it can harm others if it gets into the environment.
- Take the product to a household hazardous waste site. You can find the nearest site in the phone book or on the website of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency at <http://www.pca.state.mn.us/>.

### For more information

If you have questions, call the Minnesota Poison Control Center, 1-800-222-1222. It is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and it offers language interpretation services.

To see photos of products that were found to contain mercury, visit <http://www.health.state.mn.us/topics/skin/>.



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