

# The Effects Of Toxic Beauty Products On Black Women

Researchers tested 1,177 products targeted for sale to Black women.

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The Environmental Working Group (EWG), an independent and non-partisan organization, has released a study examining beauty and hair merchandise specifically targeted to Black women.

EWG has been working on safety concerns around cosmetics and personal care items for over a decade. Since the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) doesn't require an approval process for the ingredients used, a definitive lack of oversight impacts all women.

I spoke with Paul Pestano, an EWG senior database analyst and co-author of the paper "Big Market for Black Cosmetics, but Less-Hazardous Choices Limited," to get a better idea of what women in this demographic needed to be worried about.

Findings showed that Black women used products at a higher rate than white women, and what they used was proportionally less safe.

This information has been under the radar because of limited research.

Testing 1,177 products targeted for sale to Black women, the results showed that one out of 12 products were rated "highly" hazardous to human health. Also revealed: There are a limited range of products in the "low hazard group" available to Black women.

The most problematic products are hair relaxers, colors, and bleaches. They are linked to hormone disruption, reproductive damage, and cancer.

Both girls and women use chemical hair straighteners. These items include lye, which works to "break down the chemical bonds in hair." The connections to potential side effects are scary. Baldness and uterine growths have been cited. For women who are pregnant at the time of usage, their infants can be born prematurely or face low birthrates.

A look at 15 hair relaxers indicated an average rating of 8.1 on a scale where 7 to 10 represents a high potential hazard. Even the offerings listed as "no-lye" (sodium hydroxide) came in at from 5 to 10. Most likely, this is because calcium hydroxide is used as a replacement, despite being a "caustic irritant."

There has been a 40 percent drop in sales for hair relaxers between 2008 and 2015. However, the report detailed that "studies have found that Black Americans had higher urinary concentrations of parabens, the hormone-disrupting chemicals commonly used as preservatives in personal care products, pharmaceuticals and foods."

Where is the needed oversight?

In the previous Congress (114th), Sen. Diane Feinstein (D-CA) and Sen. Susan Collins (R-N.H.) co-sponsored the Personal Care Products Safety Act, which called upon the FDA to be proactive. One of the directives stated that the FDA would have “the authority to order recalls of certain personal care products that threaten consumer safety.” It would also enable the establishment of “conditions for safe use of an ingredient, including a limit on the amount of the ingredient or a requirement for a *warning label*.” Introduced in April of 2015, it made it to hearings in September 2016. (You might want to call your senator on this!)

The EWG’s Skin Deep Cosmetic Database now has a link that leads to a database, Hair Products for Black Woman, which analyzes 670 products.

I spoke with Tenya Steele, Director of Environmental Health at WE ACT for Environmental Justice, to get her insights both as a Black woman and as an advocate for health in her community. She wrote:

*“Growing up in an African-American home, I would always hear ‘a women’s crown is her glory,’ or in other words, a woman’s hair is her ‘crown and glory.’ It’s something that she takes much pride in. It’s almost intimate; the relationship a black woman has with her hair. We learn from early childhood, what to do with it. And at some point, for an African-American young girl, that becomes using perms and relaxers on the hair. It’s a cultural norm. It’s a behavior that we learn to do and it’s understood it’s what you should do with your hair.*

*There’s a serious lack of knowledge that using such toxic products, at such frequency, can have detrimental effects on one’s health and reproductive systems. This knowledge is imperative. Black consumers are totally in the dark about the deadly chemicals lurking in their hair products. And even if we do know that there are some harsh chemicals present, we still don’t understand the risks to our health. If our moms and aunts and friends all do it then it must be okay, right?*

*Black women need to know what this means for their health. We have a right to know.”*

Pestano spoke about the importance of getting the information out to the public, so that the potential risks from chemical exposure can be understood, thereby allowing women to making better choices.

Hopefully, the haircare industry — a lucrative market — will move forward to give women transparency about the safety they deserve.