

Mercury Poisoning Linked to Use of Skin Creams

Q What is mercury?

A. Mercury is a naturally occurring metal, which is widespread in the environment. It exists in three forms: elemental or metallic mercury, inorganic mercury, and organic mercury. Most of the mercury in the atmosphere is elemental mercury vapor; most of the mercury in water, soil, plants, and animals is either inorganic or organic.

Q. Why is Virginia Department of Health concerned about mercury in skin cream?

A. The Virginia Department of Health (VDH) has identified mercury in unregulated skin cream from Mexico used by several residents. The residents were tested and were found to have high levels of mercury. High levels of mercury can affect the brain, nervous system and kidneys, at times causing permanent damage and even death. Inorganic mercury is generally added to skin cream to “lighten” the complexion or to remove “blotchy” spots. Because these products are not under the control of the Food and Drug Administration, the product labels may not contain a complete list of ingredients. VDH urges people not to use products if there are no ingredients listed on the label or if a product lists mercury as an ingredient.

Q. Where are mercury containing products found?

A. Mercury-containing creams are typically sold outside the United States, but in some cases may be found at local flea markets or health shops as beauty or skin-lightening cream. Cultural practices, including those of Hispanic, Middle Eastern, and Asian ethnic groups, may use inorganic mercury in traditional and home remedies. Most of these products are prepared and manufactured outside of the United States.

Q. How can mercury affect my health?

A. The nature and extent of health effects from exposure to mercury will depend on the amount to which a person is exposed. The nervous system is sensitive to all forms of mercury. Exposure to high levels of metallic, inorganic, or organic mercury can permanently damage the brain, kidneys, and developing fetus. Adverse effects may include tremors, difficulty thinking, irritability, and memory loss. In some cases, it can cause death.

Q. How can mercury affect children and pregnant women?

A. Young children and developing fetuses are more sensitive to the adverse effects of mercury. Mercury passes from mother to fetus through the placenta and from the circulating blood stream into the brain. It can also pass to a nursing infant through breast milk. Fetuses may have higher levels of mercury in their blood than their mothers. Exposing the fetus to high levels of mercury may lead to developmental problems. In children, prolonged use of inorganic mercury may cause redness of the palms, irritability, and loss of appetite. Children poisoned by mercury may also develop problems in their nervous and digestive systems, and kidneys

Q. Is there a medical test to determine whether I have been exposed to mercury?

A. Yes. Tests are available that measure the amount of mercury in blood, urine, breast milk, or hair samples. However, most of these tests do not determine the form of mercury to which one is exposed. Urine and blood samples can be used to test for exposure to inorganic forms of mercury.

Q. How would I know if my product contains mercury?

A. Sometimes the package may identify mercury as an ingredient. Words and phrases to look for include: **calomel, mercury, mercurio chloride, mercurous chloride, ammoniated mercury, poison, avoid contact with silver, gold, or jewelry.** Crema de Belleza-Manning is a skin cream recently identified as having elevated mercury. Also, any product from an unknown source that is marketed as a skin-lightening cream may contain inorganic mercury.

Q. What should I do if I have a skin cream that contains mercury?

A. You should stop using the skin cream and place any unused product in a sealed plastic bag and discard it in your regular trash. You should then thoroughly wash your hands and any body parts that came into contact with the skin cream. Contact your physician concerning your health and that of anyone else with whom you have come into contact, such as an infant.

Q. What should I do if I sell skin creams that may contain mercury?

A. Stop selling them! Creams that have mercury added to them are not permitted to be sold in the United States. You should contact the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) regional program waste management in your area or call the main office in Richmond at (804) 698-4000 for information on how to best dispose of large quantities of products containing mercury.

Q. Who should I contact if I have more questions?

A. If you need further information regarding the health effects of mercury, please Contact the Virginia Department of Health, Division of Environmental Epidemiology, 109 Governor Street, 4th Floor, Richmond, VA 23219, or call (804)864-8182.

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Date: May 6, 2010