

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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HEALTH OFFICIALS WARN AGAINST COSMETICS CONTAINING MERCURY

(RICHMOND, Va.)— The Virginia Department of Health (VDH) is investigating cases of mercury exposure linked to a homemade “skin lightening” cream imported from Mexico. Ten people, including both children and adults, have shown laboratory evidence of exposure to excess mercury and are being evaluated for health effects from the cream. VDH discovered this problem while assisting California health officials in following up on an investigation of a California family exposed to the same cream.

Mercury has been used historically in a number of medicinal products including skin-lightening creams. Because mercury is toxic, compounds containing mercury have been banned from almost all regulated and over-the-counter medications in the United States. Mercury still appears in unregulated products in the United States and from abroad. Unregulated skin-lightening creams may contain mercury that can be absorbed when these products come in contact with a person’s skin.

"Before using any cosmetic product, you should make sure the ingredients are printed on the product's box or container, as required under federal law," said State Health Commissioner Karen Remley, MD, MBA. "We urge people not to use imported products if there are no ingredients listed on the label or if a product lists mercury as an ingredient. If you have used these products and have symptoms of mercury poisoning such as irritability, tremors, or memory loss, see a physician immediately and get tested for mercury poisoning."

Elevated levels of mercury in the body can affect the nervous system, kidneys, and the developing fetus. Possible health effects include memory loss, irritability, personality change, gum inflammation, upset stomach, and tremors in the arms and legs. Physicians should consider mercury intoxication in patients experiencing neurological or cognitive symptoms that cannot be otherwise explained.

If you suspect you may have used skin-lightening cream or other cosmetics contaminated with mercury, please contact your medical provider. You may also call the Virginia Department of Health (804-864-8182) or visit the VDH website at www.vdh.virginia.gov for more information about mercury. For more information about the detection and treatment of mercury intoxication, go to <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/agent/mercury/>.

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