Most Black and Latina Women Use Personal Care Products With Cancer-Causing Formaldehyde

A new study focused on formaldehyde, a known carcinogen, in lotions, cleansers and beauty products—not just hair-straightening products.

May 21, 2025 By Laura Schmidt

A new study found cancer-causing chemicals in lotions, cleaners and other beauty products primarily marketed to and used by Black and Latina women, according to a news release from Silent Spring Institute, which conducted the research.

Several studies have in recent years identified popular hair-straightening and -relaxing products that contain preservatives that release formaldehyde, a known carcinogen.

A colorless, flammable gas, formaldehyde has been linked to sensitization reactions (when the body becomes hypersensitive to substances that are generally benign), breathing problems and an increased risk for certain cancers, including myeloid leukemia (which occurs in the blood and bone marrow) and uterine cancer.

Published in Environmental Science & Technology Letters, the study is the first to demonstrate that formaldehyde and formaldehyde-release preservatives are used in a various skin and hair products beyond hair straighteners and relaxers.

For the study, 70 Black and Latina women in Los Angeles completed surveys to track each time they used a personal care product. Using an app, participants photographed ingredient labels and sent them to researchers.

Formaldehyde was present in several shampoos, body soaps, lotions and more. In fact, the cancer-causing chemical was found in about 47% of skin care products and 58% of the hair products reported.

About 53% of women in the study used at least one personal care product that listed formaldehyde releasers on its label. What's more, these women said they used many of the products daily or multiple times a week.

"We found that this isn't just about hair straighteners," said lead author Robin Dodson, ScD, an exposure scientist at Silent Spring Institute, in the news release. "These chemicals are in products we use all the time, all over our bodies. Repeated exposures like these can add up and cause serious harm."

Women reported using shampoo, lotions, body soap and eyelash glue containing formaldehyde. What's more, 12 of the lotions containing the carcinogen were from Bath & Body Works, according to The Independent.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) encourages people to read product labels to ensure they do not include formaldehyde. In 2023, the FDA proposed to ban the use of formaldehyde in hair products, but it has yet to be enacted.

While Dodson encourages consumers to avoid the formaldehyde-releasing preservative DMDM hydantoin, she also notes that it can be hard for the average consumer to identify which products contain formaldehyde.

"They have long, weird, funny names, and they typically don't have the word formaldehyde in them," she said.

According to an FDA fact sheet, some hair-straightening products that don't list formaldehyde as an ingredient may contain formalin, which is formaldehyde dissolved in water, or methylene glycol, which may be converted into formaldehyde when heated.

The new study is part of a larger effort called the Taking Stock Study, a collaborative research project between Silent Spring, Occidental College, Columbia University and Black Women for Wellness, an advocacy organization.

The project investigates how exposures to chemicals in beauty products contribute to health inequities for Black women and Latinas in California.

Executive director of Black Women for Wellness Janette Robinson Flint calls for greater government action to limit these products.

“We’re trying to do the right thing,” Flint said in the release. “But there needs to be more government oversight. We shouldn’t have to be chemists to figure out what kinds of products will make us sick.”

More than 150 hair-straightening products currently on the market contain formaldehyde, according to the New York State Department of Health.

Black Women for Wellness offers resources to help women avoid harmful chemicals, including formaldehyde releasers, in personal care products. Silent Spring’s website also offers tips for avoiding products containing carcinogens and identifying safer alternatives.

To read more, click #Cancer Risk or #Hair Health. There, you’ll see headlines such as “What’s Driving the Growing Number of Breast Cancer Cases in Young Women?” “Test for Genetic Risk for Cancers” and “FDA Bans Red Dye No. 3 Known to Cause Cancer in Animals.”

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