FDA Proposes Ban on Hair Relaxers With Formaldehyde

Formaldehyde in hair relaxers has been linked to breathing problems, infertility and an increased risk of certain cancers.

October 24, 2023 By Laura Schmidt

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recently proposed a ban on hair straighteners, or relaxers, containing formaldehyde. The ban raises awareness about the potential dangers of these products, which are predominantly used by Black women, NBC News reports.

The proposed rule notes that formaldehyde, a colorless, flammable gas, has been linked to, sensitization reactions, breathing problems and an increased risk for certain cancers, including myeloid leukemia (which occurs in the blood and bone marrow), and requests a ban on formaldehyde and formaldehyde-releasing chemicals in hair smoothing or hair straightening products.

Straightening products have also been linked to a higher risk for uterine cancer. In fact, a study found that women who used hair straightening products more than four times in the previous year were more than twice as likely to be diagnosed with uterine cancer compared with those who did not use such products.

Another study published this year in the American Journal of Epidemiology linked hair relaxers to a slight decrease in a person's ability to conceive, adding to an increasing body of research that links toxic, endocrine-disrupting chemicals found in beauty products to reproductive health issues.

The FDA already encourages people to read the labels on products to make sure they do not include formaldehyde. 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.

While sellers of cosmetic products and ingredients have a legal responsibility to ensure that their products are safe, they are not required to disclose their safety information with the FDA.

This year, four Black women filed federal lawsuits against L'Oréal and other companies, claiming that hair products they sold contained chemicals that caused them to develop uterine cancer and

other adverse health conditions.

Rhonda Terrell, one of the women suing, told NBC that she began relaxing her hair at age 8 and didn't stop doing so until she was in her early 40s. Terrell underwent six rounds of chemotherapy for uterine carcinosarcoma and was in remission for about two years before her cancer returned on her liver and abdomen this past summer.

"If I had known all those years ago, if they had a warning on the box to say this could cause cancer, I wouldn't have used it," she told NBC. "And I want to hold them accountable because I have granddaughters."

Experts emphasized that the societal pressure women of color face to conform to Eurocentric beauty norms as well as bans on certain Afrocentric hairstyles in some workplaces contribute to their disproportionate use of toxic beauty products.

To read more, click #Hair Health or #Reproductive Health. There, you'll find headlines such as "Black Women Weigh Emerging Risks of 'Creamy Crack' Hair Straighteners," "Taraji P. Henson Launches a Hair Care Line" and "Are Hair Relaxers Linked to Breast Cancer?"

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