Do Unsafe Beauty Products Support Racial Health Disparities?

Black people face increased exposures to toxic chemicals present in personal care products that can harm their health.

July 13, 2021 By Kate Ferguson

People of color face many socioeconomic risk factors that contribute to poor health outcomes. Now, findings show that a higher usage by African Americans—particularly women—of beauty products that contain harmful ingredients might result in the disproportionate development of a number of different diseases in people from this population group, reports eenews.net, an online news agency that focuses on energy and environmental issues in the United States and abroad.

According to the article, one root cause of the problem is the pressure that many Black women face to fit into white standards of beauty. Frequently, this societal coercion results in African Americans using hair relaxers and other personal care products that contain dangerous chemicals, which have been linked to illnesses such as uterine fibroids and breast cancer. (According to the National Institutes of Health, Black women are more likely than white women to be severely affected or killed by these diseases.)

“We want to marry the more traditional, place-based environmental justice framework with this well-documented body of evidence on endocrine-disrupting chemicals in beauty products marketed to women of color,” said Ami Zota, ScD, MS, an investigator at the Milken School of Public Health at George Washington University in Washington, DC.

In 2018, Zota co-authored an article in the American Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology about how systemic racism supports what she terms “the environmental injustice of beauty” that leads to Black women’s heightened exposure to poisonous hair and hygiene products.

Another study, featured in the journal Environment International, found that African-American women and children’s urine contained more phthalate metabolites and paraben metabolites, respectively, than found in the urine of their white peers. (Both substances are toxic byproducts that form when the body processes certain chemicals.)

In children, exposure to paraben metabolites can affect the development of the mammary glands, and in women exposure to phthalates has shown a connection to breast cancer.

To assimilate in this society, Black women spend a lot of money on consumer hair products that exposes them to toxic ingredients, observed Astrid Williams, PhD, MPH, an environmental justice manager at Black Women for Wellness, a health care advocacy group in California that's working to decrease harmful substances in hair preparations.

"We are dying in the cause of beauty, and that is something that needs to be addressed," Williams said.

Other experts who study racial health equity acknowledge that the issue is complex and results from a multitude of factors. "It's hard to tease out what one thing might be causing these disparities," said Alexandra Scranton, the director of science and research at Women's Voices for the Earth, an organization working to ensure products are safe for women, families and the environment.

"But we can control toxic exposures, and manufacturers and regulators should be doing their part to reduce that," Scranton stressed.

To learn more about how harmful chemicals in personal care products can affect Black women's health, read "Many Products for Black Women Contain Unsafe Ingredients" and "Are Hair Relaxers Linked to Breast Cancer?"

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.realhealthmag.com/article/unsafe-beauty-products-support-racial-health-disparities