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Home (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/>) > Population (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/population/>) > Women of Color

Women of Color



Women of color are beautiful. We all deserve clean, safe beauty products, and a society that embraces our natural skin and hair color.

Yet, women of color are over-exposed to toxic beauty products because of racialized, sexist, and Eurocentric beauty standards. The beauty industry markets the most toxic products to women of color, including [hair dyes, hair relaxers and straighteners](https://www.safecosmetics.org/products/hair/) (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/products/hair/>), [skin lighteners](https://www.safecosmetics.org/products/skin-lighteners/) (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/products/skin-lighteners/>), feminine douches, and some deodorants. These products contain chemicals linked to breast and ovarian [cancer](https://www.safecosmetics.org/health-effects/cancer/) (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/health-effects/cancer/>), uterine fibroids, [reproductive harm](https://www.safecosmetics.org/health-effects/developmental-reproductive-toxicity/) (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/health-effects/developmental-reproductive-toxicity/>), and more.

Studies show that women of color have higher levels of beauty product-related environmental chemicals in their bodies and even small exposures to toxic chemicals over time can trigger adverse health consequences.^[1]

This toxic exposure is of particular concern for [Black women](https://www.safecosmetics.org/black-beauty-project/) (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/black-beauty-project/>), who purchase and use more beauty products per capita than any other demographic. They also face many health disparities, including the [highest breast cancer mortality rate](https://www.bcpp.org/resource/african-american-women-and-breast-cancer/) (<https://www.bcpp.org/resource/african-american-women-and-breast-cancer/>) of any U.S. racial or ethnic group.

The Women's Circle of Health Study was the first to demonstrate an association between permanent hair dye use and breast cancer among Black women. This study found that Black women who use permanent hair dyes (specifically dark shades of dye) had a 51% increased risk of breast cancer. The association of hair dye use with breast cancer was replicated in the Sisters Study, which found that higher rates of breast cancer were associated with the use of hair straighteners and permanent hair dye among Black women: This study found Black women who regularly dye (darker and permanent hair dye) their hair face experience a 60% increased risk of breast cancer compared to an 8% increased risk for White women. And Black women who use chemical hair straighteners had a 30% increased risk of breast cancer than White women.^[2] [Learn about African American women and breast cancer >](https://www.bcpp.org/resource/african-american-women-and-breast-cancer/) (<https://www.bcpp.org/resource/african-american-women-and-breast-cancer/>).

Learn what we're doing to change this through our [Non-Toxic Black Beauty Project >](https://www.safecosmetics.org/black-beauty-project/) (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/black-beauty-project/>).

You decide what's best for you. While it may seem overwhelming to overhaul your whole beauty routine, you can make choices to protect yourself, one product at a time!

Products of Concern

- **Nail polish, products, and treatments**

Acrylic nail treatments are of concern for both those administering and receiving the nail treatment.^[3] Women of color make up a large percentage of those who work in the nail technician industry. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that nail workers are 6.1% Black or African American, 56.7% Asian, and 7.8% Hispanic or Latina. Due to their occupation, individuals working in this industry are exposed to carcinogens and endocrine disruptors in nail polishes, primers, and glues such as formaldehyde, dibutyl phthalate, hydroquinone, toluene, and ethyl/methyl methacrylate daily.^{[4],[5]}

- **Hair relaxers**

Hair treatments, including hair relaxers or Brazilian blowouts, expose women to some ugly chemicals. Hair relaxers (both lye and non-lye) are associated with hazards such as chemical scalp burn, scarring, dry skin, baldness, eye irritation, and dry broken hair. Hair relaxers are made with a base of sodium hydroxide, guanidine hydroxide, or ammonium thioglycolate,^[6] which are high pH chemicals, and can cause irreversible damage to both hair and scalp. Post-relaxing treatments require neutralizing shampoos and conditioners, which often contain chemicals like formaldehyde-releasing preservatives, endocrine disruptors, or carcinogens, which are more easily absorbed into the body's system.

- **Skin lighteners**

Skin lighteners, which may also be marketed as skin lightening or spot and acne removal creams and lotions, may contain hydroquinone (a known endocrine disruptor that has been banned from over-the-counter products in the U.S. since 2020^[7]), or worse, mercury. Skin lighteners sold in ethnic markets that were imported to the U.S. are of particular concern because they have been found to contain mercury,^[8] which is associated with a host of health problems including nervous system, reproductive, immune, and respiratory toxicity. Mercury is easily spread on different surfaces, and may adversely impact not only the individual who uses the product but also other family members as well.^[9]

- **Fragrance**

Fragrance is often a driving force behind buying choices. Cosmetic and personal care giant Procter & Gamble (P&G) data shows that 22.5% of black women choose a product based on fragrance,^[10] and that it is also an important aspect for both Latina and Latino customers.^[11] A commonly used ingredient in fragrance is Diethyl Phthalate (DEP), and information gathered by the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) shows that black women and Hispanic women have much higher rates of DEP in their urine (almost double!) than white and Asian women.^[12] Phthalates have a wide variety of harmful health effects.

Chemicals of Concern

1,4-DIOXANE (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/chemicals/14-dioxane/>)

Benzophenone & Related Compounds

(<https://www.safecosmetics.org/chemicals/benzophenone/>)

Carcinogens in Cosmetics (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/chemicals/known-carcinogens/>)

Coal Tar (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/chemicals/coal-tar/>)

Ethanolamine Compounds (MEA, DEA, TEA And Others)

(<https://www.safecosmetics.org/chemicals/ethanolamine-compounds/>)

Formaldehyde And Formaldehyde-Releasing Preservatives

(<https://www.safecosmetics.org/chemicals/formaldehyde/>)

Hydroquinone (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/chemicals/hydroquinone/>)

Nitrosamines (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/chemicals/nitrosamines/>)

Octinoxate (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/chemicals/octinoxate/>)

PABA (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/chemicals/paba/>)

Petrolatum, Petroleum Jelly

(<https://www.safecosmetics.org/chemicals/petrolatum/>)

Phthalates (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/chemicals/phthalates/>)

Polyacrylamide (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/chemicals/polyacrylamide/>)

Retinol and Retinol Compounds

(<https://www.safecosmetics.org/chemicals/retinol-and-retinol-compounds/>)

Styrene Acrylates Copolymer

(<https://www.safecosmetics.org/chemicals/styrene-acrylates-copolymer/>)

Synthetic Musks (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/chemicals/synthetic-musks/>)

Titanium Dioxide (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/chemicals/titanium-dioxide/>)

Toluene (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/chemicals/toluene/>)

[View all Chemicals of Concern > \(/chemicals/\)](#)

Quick Tips

(Click Image to download)

Updated downloadable tip card coming soon

1. Know that you matter, and you deserve safe, non-toxic beauty products. Beauty injustice is real.
2. Bring your own neutralizing shampoo to the salon.
3. Avoid nail polishes with any of the toxic trio: dibutyl phthalate, formaldehyde, and toluene.
4. Avoid products with mystery ingredients “fragrance” or “parfum” when possible.
5. Read labels closely and find safer alternatives using tools like [Clearya](https://www.clearya.com/) (<https://www.clearya.com/>), [Skin Deep](https://www.ewg.org/skindeep/), (<https://www.ewg.org/skindeep/>) and [MadeSafe](https://www.madesafe.org/) (<https://www.madesafe.org/>).
6. For more information and other resources on this topic, check out some of our partners:
 1. [Black Women for Wellness](http://www.bwwla.org/) (<http://www.bwwla.org/>).
 2. [California Nail Salon Collaborative](http://www.cahealthynailsalons.org/) (<http://www.cahealthynailsalons.org/>).
 3. [Latinas Contra Cancer](http://www.latinascontracancer.org/) (<http://www.latinascontracancer.org/>).
 4. [WeAct for Environmental Justice](http://www.weact.org/) (<http://www.weact.org/>).
 5. [Women’s Voices of the Earth](http://www.womensvoices.org/) (<http://www.womensvoices.org/>).

By using the term “women of color,” we recognize this includes women from a wide variety of backgrounds (including African American, Black, Latina, Native American, Asian, Asian Pacific Islander) who are impacted by their own unique cultural traditions regarding beauty and beauty rituals, as well as product preferences.

References

- [1] Zota, Ami R, and Bhavna Shamasunder. “The environmental injustice of beauty: framing chemical exposures from beauty products as a health disparities concern.” *American journal of obstetrics and gynecology* vol. 217,4 (2017): 418.e1-418.e6. doi:10.1016/j.ajog. 2017.07.020.
- [2] Eberle, Carolyn E et al. “Hair dye and chemical straightener use and breast cancer risk in a large US population of black and white women.” *International journal of cancer* vol. 147,2 (2020): 383-391. doi:10.1002/ijc.32738.
- [3] Women’s Voices for the Earth, “Glossed Over” (2007), available at <http://www.womensvoices.org/issues/reports/glossed-over/> (<http://www.womensvoices.org/issues/reports/glossed-over/>).
- [4] Ibid.

[5] <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/748> (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/748>).

[6] Davis, G., Bonta, D., & Smith, S. (2000, January 1). A Guide to Chemical Exposures in the Nail Salons. Retrieved March 4, 2015, from <http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/hesis/documents/artnails.pdf> (<http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/hesis/documents/artnails.pdf>).

[7] Hair Relaxers and Straighteners. (n.d.). Retrieved February 19, 2015, from <http://www.lesstoxicguide.ca/index.asp?fetch=personal#hairr> (<http://www.lesstoxicguide.ca/index.asp?fetch=personal#hairr>).

[8] Gordon Vrdoljak, Ph.D. (2014, August 10). Rooting Out Skin Creams that Contain Toxic Mercury. American Chemical Society National Meeting & Exposition. Lecture conducted from American Chemical Society, San Francisco.

[9] Ibid.

[10] The Black Consumer Opportunity. (2012, April 1). Retrieved February 24, 2015, from <http://brandedcontent.adage.com/pdf/CABblackconsumer.pdf> (<http://brandedcontent.adage.com/pdf/CABblackconsumer.pdf>).

[11] Jeffries, N. (2012, January 20). GCI Magazine. Retrieved February 13, 2015, from <http://www.gcimagazine.com/networking/coverage/137786783.html?page=2> (<http://www.gcimagazine.com/networking/coverage/137786783.html?page=2>).

[12] Fourth National Report on Human Exposure to Environmental Chemicals. (2015, February 1). Retrieved February 24, 2015, from http://www.cdc.gov/biomonitoring/pdf/FourthReport_UpdatedTables_Feb2015.pdf (http://www.cdc.gov/biomonitoring/pdf/FourthReport_UpdatedTables_Feb2015.pdf).

Explore other populations

- [Babies & Children](https://www.safecosmetics.org/population/babies-children/) (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/population/babies-children/>).
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- [Women of Color](https://www.safecosmetics.org/population/women-of-color/) (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/population/women-of-color/>).
- [Workers](https://www.safecosmetics.org/population/workers/) (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/population/workers/>).
- [Teenagers](https://www.safecosmetics.org/population/teenagers/) (<https://www.safecosmetics.org/population/teenagers/>).

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