



African American Women & Breast Cancer

African American women face both disproportionate exposure to breast carcinogens and the highest risk of serious health impacts from the disease. We've put together a fact sheet to help you understand the current stats, product types to avoid, and chemicals of concern.

Facts

Globally:

Breast cancer affects more women than any other type of cancer and is the leading cause of cancer-related deaths among women.

In the US:

- A US woman's lifetime risk of breast cancer is **1 in 8**.
- Breast cancer has the highest mortality rate of any cancer in women between the ages of **20 and 59**.
- African American women have a **31%** breast cancer mortality rate – the highest of any U.S. racial or ethnic group.
- Among women **younger than 45**, breast cancer incidence is higher among African American women than white women.
- Younger women in general, and younger African American women in particular, are more likely to present with the **triple-negative subtype** of the disease, a subtype that is both more aggressive and associated with a higher mortality.
- Over the past 20 years, despite the universal drop in mortality rates, we have seen a **rise in the incidence** of breast cancer in African American women. In particular, disparities between mortality rates for white and black women have grown significantly. The mortality rate for black women diagnosed with breast cancer is **42% higher** than the comparable rate for white women. Triple negative breast cancer is diagnosed more often in American women of African descent than in those of European descent in the United States.



Products to Watch Out For:

These products are often marketed to black women yet contain some of the most worrisome ingredients in cosmetics.

- skin lighteners
- hair relaxers
- Brazilian blowout treatments
- acrylic nails



While it may seem overwhelming to overhaul your entire beauty bag, it is possible to make small changes one product at a time!

Skin lighteners

Skin lighteners, which may also be marketed as skin lightening or spot and acne removal creams and lotions, often contain hydroquinone (a known endocrine disruptor), or worse, mercury. Skin lighteners sold in ethnic markets that are imported to the U.S. are of particular concern because they have been found to contain mercury, 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 other family members as well, particularly babies.



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, which are high pH chemicals, and can cause irreversible damage to both hair and scalp. Post-relaxing treatment require neutralizing shampoos and conditioners to be used, and often contain chemicals like formaldehyde-releasing preservatives, endocrine disruptors, or carcinogens..



Nail polish, products and treatments

Acrylic nail treatments are of concern for both those administering and receiving the nail treatment. Women of color make up a large percentage of those who work as nail technicians. Bureau of Labor statistics show that nail workers are 6.1% black or African American, 56.7% Asian, and 7.8% Hispanic or Latina. Occupationally, 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 on a daily basis. Studies routinely show that women working in nail salons report health concerns such as rashes, headaches, dizziness, and breathing difficulties, as well as miscarriages, birth defects and cancers.

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. A commonly used ingredient in fragrance is diethyl phthalate (DEP), an endocrine disruptor. Phthalates are linked to breast cancer, developmental issues, decreased fertility, obesity and asthma. 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.



Chemicals of Concern: Benzene, coal tar, coumarin, DMDM hydantoin, formaldehyde, fragrance, hydroquinone, monoethyl phthalate (MEP), monoethanolamine (mea), mercury, mercury salts, parabens, phthalates, p-phenylenediamine, toluene.

Six Safe Cosmetics Tips for Women of Color

- Skip toxic hair products. Go natural!
- Bring your own safer neutralizing shampoo to the salon to avoid: formaldehyde-releasing preservatives, endocrine disruptors, or carcinogens.
- Avoid nail polishes that include any of the toxic trio: dibutyl phthalate, formaldehyde, toluene.
- Reduce your use of products with added fragrance.
- Read labels closely and find safer alternatives using apps and websites like [ThinkDirty](#), EWG's [Healthy Living](#), the [Good Guide](#). Trusted third party certifiers like [Made Safe](#) and EWG [Verified](#) will rate your personal care products for safety and toxicity.

Given that African American communities face both high exposure and high risk, it's crucial that the \$84 billion cosmetics industry reform to ensure that cosmetic products, particularly those targeting these vulnerable communities, are made with safe ingredients.