

# Probe finds high levels of mercury in some skin products

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Some creams promising to lighten skin, eliminate age spots and zap freckles contain high levels of mercury, a toxic metal that can cause severe health problems, a Chicago investigation has found.

The Tribune sent 50 skin-lightening creams to a certified lab for testing, most of them purchased in Chicago stores and a few ordered online. Six were found to contain amounts of mercury banned by federal law.

Of those, five had more than 6,000 parts per million -- enough to potentially cause kidney damage over time, according to a medical expert.

The [Food and Drug Administration](#) banned mercury in skin-bleaching or lightening products in 1990, but the agency rarely tests the products to see if consumers are at risk. The Tribune's tests -- among only a handful ever conducted -- show that tainted products are still readily available.

"I'm shocked and speechless," said Dr. Jonith Breadon, a Chicago [dermatologist](#) who said she sees patients weekly who ask about lightening their skin. "I just assumed since (mercury) was banned in the U.S., it never got in. But clearly that isn't true."

FDA spokesman Ira Allen said that with fewer than 500 inspectors reviewing imports, the agency cannot check all food, drug and cosmetic products under its jurisdiction. "It is likely that things get past us," he said.

When notified of the Tribune's test results, the retailers said they would pull the products from shelves, and two distributors said they would stop selling them.

The market for skin lighteners is booming in the U.S. and abroad. Some people of Asian, Latino and African heritage use the creams because lighter skin is often considered a status symbol in their cultures. Many consumers, including Caucasians, use the creams to diminish age spots or to even out skin tone, while others want to lighten their entire face or bodies.

Sales of lightening products in the U.S. are expected to increase nearly 18 percent by 2015, reaching \$76 million annually, according to market researcher Global Industry Analysts.

Consumers can't know for sure which creams are tainted. Stores across the city sell dozens of brands, many of them made overseas. The six creams that tested high in the Tribune tests were manufactured in Lebanon, China, India, Pakistan and Taiwan.

The creams were purchased at a variety of stores: a large beauty-supply store in the Uptown neighborhood, an herbal medicine shop in Chinatown, an East Indian beauty salon on Devon Avenue, a grocery store also on Devon, and a small African shop on 79th Street.

Researchers say people are affected differently by mercury, depending on the amount and duration of exposure, among other variables. Daniel Hryhorczuk of the University of Illinois School of Public Health said the amounts of mercury found by the Tribune were troubling and could lead to [kidney damage](#) at the least.

"Those are very high levels," he said.

The highest level of mercury, nearly 30,000 parts per million, turned up in a circular container of thick, white cream labeled as Stillman's Skin Bleach Cream. Adbul Amin said he decided to stock it at his grocery store because the product is so popular in Pakistan.

"I didn't have any idea it had mercury inside," Amin said, promising he would no longer sell the product.

Mercury is used in skin whiteners because the metal blocks production of melanin, which gives hair and skin its pigmentation. Other chemicals can do the same thing, but mercury is inexpensive and it works, said Ellen Silbergeld, a professor of environmental health science at Johns Hopkins.

It's also toxic. Mercury is rapidly absorbed through the skin and can affect people neurologically, Silbergeld said. They might experience blurred vision or trouble walking. Severe mercury poisoning can shut down organs and lead to death.

Silbergeld said the use of mercury in skin creams has been well-documented in other countries and should be of concern to the FDA.

"In a multicultural society such as ours, you can expect that these kinds of issues are going to arise," she said. "The duty of the agency is to protect everyone."

The FDA's Allen said the issue of mercury in skin creams hasn't been on the agency's radar since 2006, when some creams from the Dominican Republic were found to contain mercury.

The creams often follow a complicated path to the United States. Retailers say they order the creams over the Internet, purchase them from suppliers and sometimes bring them in personally from abroad.

Some sellers and suppliers wouldn't disclose where they bought creams that tested high for mercury.

Amin said he bought the Stillman bleach cream from Detroit-based B.M. Trading. That company's owner, Malik Younis, would not say where he purchased the product.

The packaging says it is manufactured in an area of Pakistan "under agreement with" the Stillman Co. Inc. USA, based in Aurora.

Back in the 1970s, Stillman authorized a Pakistani company to make and sell skin whiteners under the Stillman name -- but only in Pakistan, said Stillman owner Bob Bereman.

In 2007, Bereman said, he saw the Pakistani product being sold online and thought it might contain mercury. He said he had the product tested, and when the results showed mercury he notified the FDA. The agency said it couldn't comment on the case, and Bereman said he couldn't do anything else to stop production of the cream. Efforts to reach the Pakistani company were unsuccessful.

Four foreign manufacturers contacted by the Tribune said the tainted products sold under their name could be counterfeit.

Counterfeit drugs and cosmetics, long a problem in other countries, are increasingly common in the U.S. as more of these products are sold online and imported, FDA officials said.

Frank Lin, a sales manager for Zenna Chemical Industry Co. in Taiwan., said the popularity of the company's Top-Gel product has spurred others to manufacture fakes. He said the products the Tribune tested were likely imposters, right down to the hologram on the box.

"We try to go after them, but they just shut down (the factories) or run away," Lin said.

The Tribune tests were conducted by Columbia Analytical Services, a lab in Kelso, Wash. Those tests found that one cream labeled Top-Gel, purchased at a small African shop on the South Side, contained 7,030 parts per million of mercury. When the Tribune bought and tested another tube of Top-Gel sold online by a California-based company, it was found to contain 1.9 parts per million -- a much smaller amount, but still banned. Labels on both boxes said the creams were manufactured by Zenna Chemical.

Lin sent the Tribune his company's own lab results that reported no mercury in his samples of the Top-Gel product.

When the Tribune notified another company, Shahnaz Husain Group, that tests showed its product contained mercury, the company in India sent lab results indicating it is safe. The company also said the product tested by the Tribune could be counterfeit.

Besides mercury, medical experts are also concerned about two other ingredients sometimes found in skin lighteners, steroids and hydroquinone. High amounts of hydroquinone, a bleaching agent, may darken skin, and animal studies suggest it could cause cancer.

Breadon said she often feels like she is fighting a losing battle because skin creams are so readily available in ethnic shops.

She said she often sees patients whose faces are lighter than the rest of their bodies and must coax out of them what products they use. Many patients feel most comfortable buying a lightening agent from a small neighborhood shop because they can avoid seeing a doctor for a prescription. Plus, friends tell them the products work.

"Culturally, it has sort of become a part of their life," she said. "I've had patients who have said, 'I'm a model; I won't get a modeling job if my skin isn't lighter.'"

Dermatologists said there are safe alternatives for people who want to lighten age spots, stretch marks or other discolorations on their skin.

Indeed, some of the more popular skin lightening creams tested by the Tribune did not contain any mercury, including one sample of Dr. Fred Summit Skin Whitener, made in south suburban Harvey and sold at area Walgreens. Tests also found no [mercury](#) in a sample of Fair & White, a well-known lightener made in France.

Dr. Roopal Kundu, assistant professor of dermatology at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine, said patients can ask for a prescription from a doctor.

Also, she said, the cream should be used only to lighten spots, not for bleaching normally dark [skin](#). "If used appropriately and managed and not used indefinitely, then you can use it safely," Kundu said.

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