

Study shows racial differences in personal care product use, may lead to health inequities

May 18 2021



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A large survey of women in California shows significant racial and ethnic differences in the types of personal care products women use on a

daily basis. Because many personal care products contain endocrine disrupting chemicals (EDCs) like parabens and phthalates that interfere with the body's hormones, the findings could shed light on how different products influence women's exposures to harmful chemicals that contribute to health inequities.

The study appears in the *Journal of Exposure Science & Environmental Epidemiology* as part of a special issue focused on health equity.

"We know Black women have higher levels of many EDCs in their bodies than other groups of women," says lead author Dr. Robin Dodson, an environmental exposure scientist at Silent Spring Institute. "What we don't know is what's driving these exposures, and therefore what's driving some of the health disparities we see in the U.S. population."

The new study aims to fill that gap by providing one of the first comprehensive inventories of the range and types of products women use across race and ethnicity.

Black women go through puberty at younger ages, and have higher rates of hormone-mediated problems such as pre-term birth, uterine fibroids, and infertility than other groups of women. Incidence rates of breast cancer and endometrial cancer among Black women are also increasing.

Given evidence linking exposure to EDCs with harmful health effects such as reproductive problems and cancer, and the lack of data on the kinds of products women of color use, researchers decided to partner with community groups in California to survey a diverse group of women.

The survey is part of a larger effort called the [Taking Stock Study](#)—a collaboration between Occidental College, Black Women for Wellness, LA Grit Media, Silent Spring Institute, and George Washington

University Milken Institute School of Public Health.

The team surveyed 357 women living in California about their use of [personal care products](#), focusing on women of reproductive age, between the ages of 18 and 34. Participants were asked about the types of products they use, how often they use them, and why they choose certain ones over others.

The researchers gathered information on 54 types of personal care products, including cosmetics, hair products, menstrual or intimate products such as douches, and body lotions. The team also asked about the use of scented products.

Women in the study reported using on average eight products a day, with some using up to 30 products daily. When researchers compared product use among Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian, and White women, they noted a number of differences:

- For 28 of the products, use varied significantly by race/ethnicity, with the largest differences seen between Black and White women.
- Hispanic/Latinx and Asian women reported using more cosmetics than Black and White women.
- Black women reported using a higher number of hair products and more menstrual/intimate products.

The use of scented products was also common, with 70 percent of women preferring scented over unscented options. Scientists are concerned about exposure to fragrance ingredients in products because they often consist of dozens of undisclosed and unregulated chemicals, some of which have been linked with asthma and hormone disruption.

Dr. Bhavna Shamasunder, an environmental health researcher at

Occidental College who is co-leading the Taking Stock Study, says racism may underlie these patterns. "Women of color can feel pressure to conform to European beauty norms, whether from workplaces or widespread media images. But to achieve straighter hair or a different skin tone through use of a product, you have to use pretty toxic chemicals."

"This study is important not only because it shows how women of color and Black women in particular are more highly exposed to dangerous chemicals, but it also reinforces the notion that racism is a public health issue," says Janette Robinson Flint, executive director of Black Women for Wellness.

Next, the team plans to collect [urine samples](#) from study participants to measure levels of EDCs in their bodies and compare their levels with the products they use. The researchers also plan on testing products for a range of chemicals to find out which products pose a greater risk.

Findings from the study will help communities develop guidance for [women](#) on how to protect themselves from harmful ingredients in their everyday products, as well as inform policies and the development of safer products.

More information: Robin E. Dodson et al, Personal care product use among diverse women in California: Taking Stock Study, *Journal of Exposure Science & Environmental Epidemiology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1038/s41370-021-00327-3](#)

Provided by Silent Spring Institute

Citation: Study shows racial differences in personal care product use, may lead to health

inequities (2021, May 18) retrieved 25 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-05-racial-differences-personal-product-health.html>

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