

FDA is thinking about a ban on hair-straightening chemicals. Stylists say Black women have moved on

October 19 2023, by Kenya Hunter



Kayleigh Butler, a hair stylist, stands for a portrait at her studio in Atlanta on Tuesday, Oct. 17, 2023. “Relaxers have taken an extreme decline ... as we became more knowledgeable about the effects of the relaxer on your hair and what it can do to your hair,” says Butler, who remembers getting relaxers when she was 5 years old. She added: “I think people just wanted to move away from that and live a healthier lifestyle.” Credit: AP Photo/Kenya Hunter

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is considering a ban on certain hair-straightening chemicals that have been used by Black women for years and that research shows may increase the risk of uterine cancer.

But Black [hair](#) stylists say such products—specifically the ones being looked at by the FDA, which contain formaldehyde and formaldehyde-releasing chemicals—have fallen out of favor, especially among younger generations.

"Relaxers have taken an extreme decline ... as we became more knowledgeable about the effects of the relaxer on your hair and what it can do to your hair," said Kayleigh Butler, a hair stylist in Atlanta who remembers getting relaxers when she was 5 years old. She added, "I think people just wanted to move away from that and live a healthier lifestyle."

The FDA is in the first steps of the process: The notice of a [possible rule](#) was recently added to its regulatory agenda. The agency aims to publish an advance notice of proposed rulemaking by April 2024, but items can stay on the agenda for years.

The possible rule would apply to both salon-grade and at-home products, FDA spokesperson Courtney Rhodes said.

Jasmine Garcia, who owns Jasmine Nicole Xclusives Hair Salon in Atlanta, estimated that less than 5% of her clients—who are Black [women](#)—want relaxers. She told The Associated Press that a client texted her after learning about the potential ban, saying: "Of all the things the FDA needs to look into, why relaxers right now?"

Earlier this year, U.S. Reps. Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts and

Shontel Brown of Ohio [asked the FDA to investigate](#) chemical hair straighteners, pointing to a study published in 2022 from the National Institutes of Health that linked [straighteners to an increased risk of uterine cancer](#). Pressley said in an Oct. 6 statement that the FDA's possible action is "a win for [public health](#)—especially the health of Black women."

"Regardless of how we wear our hair, we should be allowed to show up in the world without putting our health at risk," she said.

The FDA [posted a video Wednesday on social media](#), reminding people that no action has been taken yet and that the agency plans to work with and encourage the cosmetics industry to develop alternative straightening products.

[In a study from Boston University published this month](#) in the journal Environmental Research, researchers followed nearly 45,000 Black women for up to 22 years, the majority of them moderate or heavy users of relaxers. Among [postmenopausal women](#), those who used relaxers most often had a greater than 50% increased risk of uterine cancer compared to those who never or seldom used them.

Black people have the [highest rates of death from cancer](#), according to data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The risks for Black women could shift with better regulation of chemical hair straighteners, said Dr. Kimberly Bertrand, an author of the Boston University study.

She added that FDA action would be a step in the right direction, but that it shouldn't focus solely on formaldehyde.

"I think consideration of endocrine disruptors like phthalates and parabens would be important, and heavy metals, too," she said. "Getting

rid of formaldehyde in these products certainly is a good thing, but ... I don't know that it renders those products completely safe."

Dr. Yolanda Lenzy, a dermatologist and licensed cosmetologist who co-authored the Boston University study, also said there's still some pressure for Black women to have straight hair, especially in conservative job fields like law.

Twenty-four states have some type of law banning discrimination over hairstyles, but Black people have still run into issues, like in Texas, where a high school student was suspended because of his locs.

"I just know so many Black women who've made the choices about how they show up in the world based on codes at work, on rules at work, that ... their hair has to be presentable," Lenzy said. "What does that really mean?"

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