

The environmental injustice of beauty

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Women of color have higher levels of beauty-product-related chemicals in their bodies compared to white women, according to a new commentary. Credit: Snapshot

Women of color have higher levels of beauty-product-related chemicals in their bodies compared to white women, according to a commentary published today in the *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*. The authors say even small exposures to such toxic chemicals can lead to health problems. They go on to say that reproductive health professionals must be prepared to counsel patients who have questions about such

exposures. And health professionals can also promote policies that will protect women, especially women of color, from harmful chemicals in cosmetics and other personal care products.

"Pressure to meet Western standards of beauty means Black, Latina and Asian American [women](#) are using more [beauty products](#) and thus are exposed to [higher levels](#) of chemicals known to be harmful to [health](#)," says Ami Zota, ScD, MS, an assistant professor of environmental and occupational health at Milken Institute School of Public Health (Milken Institute SPH) at the George Washington University. "Beauty product use is a critical but underappreciated source of reproductive harm and environmental injustice."

Zota and Bhavna Shamasunder at the Occidental College in Los Angeles co-authored the commentary.

The authors point out that the beauty product industry is estimated to bring in more than \$400 billion globally. They also say that previous studies have documented that Black, Latina and Asian-American women spend more on beauty products than the national average, often because of marketing practices that emphasize a European standard of beauty.

For example, women of color buy products like skin lightening face cream which often contain hidden ingredients such as topical steroids or the toxic metal mercury, Zota says.

Black women are known to suffer more anxiety about having "bad hair" and are twice as likely to experience social pressure to straighten their hair. Hair products like straighteners or relaxers are likely to contain estrogen and can trigger premature reproductive development in young girls and possibly uterine tumors, the commentary says.

Other studies show that beauty and [personal care products](#) contain

multiple, hidden chemicals that are linked to endocrine, reproductive or development toxicity. They can be especially dangerous for women age 18 to 34, the authors say. Women in this age group are known to be heavy buyers, purchasing more than 10 types of beauty products per year. Such women and their offspring may experience heightened vulnerability to such chemicals, especially if exposure occurs during sensitive periods such as pregnancy.

Marketing efforts have also encouraged Black women to use douching products with messages about uncleanliness and odors. A [study done by Zota and colleagues in 2016](#) found that in a national sample of reproductive age women, those who reported douching frequently, had 150 percent higher exposures to a harmful [chemical](#) known as DEP. This chemical, often found in fragranced beauty products, may cause birth defects in babies and has also been linked to [health problems](#) in women, Zota says.

At the same time, research suggests that low-income women of color are more likely to live in an environment with high levels of pollutants contaminating the air, soil and water. Thus women of color are not only heavy users of beauty products but may also be exposed to [toxic chemicals](#) simply by living in a more polluted home or neighborhood.

"For women who live in already polluted neighborhoods, beauty product chemicals may add to their overall burden of exposures to toxic chemicals, says Bhavna Shamasunder, as assistant professor in the Urban and Environmental Policy Department at Occidental College. "Certain racial/ethnic groups may be systematically and disproportionately exposed to chemicals in beauty products since factors such as institutionalized racism can influence product use." In the commentary, the co-authors warn that multiple exposures to chemicals in beauty products and in the environment add up and can interfere with healthy reproduction and development.

Health professionals can advance environmental justice by being prepared to counsel their patients about the risks of exposures to hidden chemicals in [beauty](#) products. And the authors say that health care providers and researchers should call for health protective policies such as improved testing and disclosure.

More information: The commentary, "The Environmental Injustice of Beauty: Framing Chemical Exposures from Beauty Products as a Health Disparities Concern," appears online in the *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*.

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