

## Let's talk about skin-lightening creams

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#### Dr Brighton Chireka

I have decided to revisit the issue of skin-lightening creams so as to raise awareness in our community. We are told that this year is for learning (gore redzidzo) so we shall learn a lot (gore rino tichadzidza zvakawanda). SKIN lightening cosmetics are a multi-billion dollar industry pushing the idea that beauty equates with white skin and that lightening dark skin is both achievable and preferable. In many parts of Africa and Asia, lighter-skinned woman are considered more beautiful, are believed to be more successful and more likely to find marriage. The origin of this belief in Africa is not clear, but researchers have linked it to Africa's colonial history where white skin was the epitome of beauty.

Research by the World Health Organisation shows that Nigerians are the highest users of such products: 77% of Nigerian women use the products on a regular basis. They are followed by Togo with 59%; South Africa with 35%; and Mali at 25%. I am not sure about the statistics for Zimbabwe but judging from the numbers of the women that have uncharacteristically light skin faces while the rest of their bodies are darker, makes me conclude that we are one of the highest users.

Sadly very few people in Africa know the concentration of the toxic compounds that are contained in the products on the black market. This is a cause for concern and I do hope that this article will help raise awareness on the dangers of these creams.

Skin colour, along with hair and eye colour, is genetically determined by the amount of melanin found in the top layers of skin. Its varied presence – which accounts for different skin colours – is linked to a population's historic levels of sun exposure. Melanin is produced by melanocytes to protect the DNA of our skin from sun damage. Skin lighteners contain an active ingredient or a combination of ingredients that reduces the amount of melanin in the skin where it is applied. Excessively reducing this concentration of melanin may increase the risk of skin cancers.

Most skin lightening creams are sold illegally on the black market and can contain toxic substances, such as high steroids, mercury and hydroxyquinone, and sadly many people are typically unaware of the risks. Exposure to mercury can have serious health consequences such as damages to the kidneys and the nervous system, and interfere with the development of the brain in unborn children and very young children. The sad thing is that you don't have to use the product yourself to be affected.

People - particularly children - can get mercury in their bodies from breathing in mercury vapours if a member of the household uses a skin cream containing mercury. Infants and small children can ingest mercury if they touch their parents who have used these products, get cream on their hands and then put their hands and fingers into their mouth, which they are prone to do. Steroid creams can be used under the supervision of health professionals to treat skin diseases but skin lightening creams have high dose of steroids and are sold on the black market. Unmonitored use of high-dose steroids in skin lightening creams can lead to many problems such as:

Permanent skin bleaching

Thinning of skin

Uneven colour loss, leading to a blotchy appearance

Redness

Intense irritation

Some of the dangers associated with the use of these creams include blood cancers such as leukaemia and cancers of the liver and kidneys, as well as a severe skin condition called ochronosis, a form of hyper-pigmentation which causes the skin to turn a dark purple shade.

Hydroquinone which is found in many creams works to reduce the amount of melanin your skin produces, which in turn makes your skin lighter in appearance. However, doing this makes your skin more susceptible to sunlight that can lead to dangerous sunburns, and over a prolonged period of time, an increased risk of certain types of skin cancer. Also hydroquinone can cause ochronosis and this is difficult to treat as it is permanent turning of skin into a dark purple shade.

## **How to Protect Yourself**

People with black skin are not advised to use lightening creams since they can cause a very dramatic and ugly change of skin colour where they have been applied. The cream leaves irregular white or dark patches, which are hard to cover up. The truth is that there is no safe way to lighten dark skin permanently so stop harming yourself.

Check the label of any skin lightening, anti-aging or other skin product you use. If you see the words "mercurous chloride," "calomel," "mercuric," "mercurio," or "mercury," stop using the product immediately.

If there is no label or no ingredients are listed, do not use the product.

Don't use products labelled in languages that you do not understand.

If you suspect you have been using a product with any of these chemicals: high steroids, mercury and hydroquinone you need to see your doctor immediately without delay. People who were using creams with high steroids should not stop immediately, because their bodies would no longer be making enough hormones since it was getting them from the creams - albeit in very high doses.

They should see their doctor for special advice on what to do.

Conclusion

It is sad that, entrenched in the minds of many blacks from a young age is the adage "if it's white, it's all right", a belief that has chipped away at the self-esteem of millions. Until this changes, no amount of official bans or public information campaigns will stop people risking serious damage to their health in the pursuit of what they think is beauty.

I challenge everyone to start valuing their skin colour and stop harming themselves. We many not want to talk about this subject, but a cruel racial hierarchy still exists in countries such as Britain where the lighter-skinned Jamaican, for example, is "superior" to the darker skinned Nigerian; where light brown is preferable to dark brown. Dark skin means failure; light skin is beautiful and equates to success.

Mind control is the most powerful weapon. People can be dominated mentally through relentless campaigns, propaganda and false values. All that one has to induce is a feeling of emptiness and deplete self-esteem. Surely I ask, should we perish using these harmful creams because of false values? God, when he created you, saw that you were beautiful and rested; so please, please calm down.

This article was compiled by **Dr. Brighton Chireka** who is a GP and a Patient Engagement Advocate (PEA) in Folkestone Kent, UK. You can contact him on **[info@docbeecee.co.uk](mailto:info@docbeecee.co.uk)**

Disclaimer: This article is for information only and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions. Dr. Chireka has used all reasonable care in compiling the information, but makes no warranty as to its accuracy. Consult a doctor or other health professionals for proper diagnosis.