



Skin Lightening Treatments

Background

The use of skin lightening products is widespread among women across Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. Anecdotal evidence suggests use by men is growing and that some women use skin lightening products on their children. There is no reliable data on the use of treatments in the UK.

Skin colour is genetically determined. Specialised cells (called melanocytes) produce the brown pigment melanin which gives skin its colour and helps to protect skin against sun damage. There are a number of ways to lighten the skin by acting on melanocytes to reduce or interfere with normal melanin production. Three effective treatments are used by dermatologists to manage medical conditions involving uneven skin colour, with long-term lightening effects. They are:

- **hydroquinone**, an irritant bleaching agent found in prescription formulations used under medical supervision
- **steroids**, anti-inflammatory compounds which can have a lightening effect and are used to treat certain skin conditions
- **laser treatment** to reduce pigmentation.

By law hydroquinone and steroids cannot be used in cosmetic products sold in the UK. However, many countries have not banned their use and products purchased from overseas suppliers may contain them. UK Trading Standards agencies have identified imports of skin lightening creams containing hydroquinone, steroids and mercury.¹

Cosmetic Use

People using skin lightening treatments do so to reduce the appearance of age spots, acne scars and discolouration or to lighten naturally dark skin. Although most commonly used on the face and other visible body parts, some use them on the entire body. Numerous cosmetic products marketed as having a skin lightening effect are available from retailers. These products may contain one or more ingredients purported to have a lightening effect as well as a high SPF to prevent skin from darkening through sun exposure. Effects of these products are usually temporary and reversible. However, products bought online or from street markets may contain active ingredients in excess of safe limits or illegal ingredients, (such as mercury) and have long-lasting, irreversible effects.

Motivations for Changing Skin Colour

Historical and anthropological studies have focused on Africa and Asia and suggest that skin-bleaching is rooted in traditional values and beliefs, but heavily influenced by European colonialism and Western ideology.² In parts of Africa, native conceptions of beauty valued lighter skin tones, but colonialism established a racial hierarchy within which dark-skinned native Africans were considered 'primitive' and inferior compared to light-skinned Europeans. In India, light skin was associated with belonging to a higher class under the traditional caste system, an association strengthened by colonialism. Researchers have noted that an increasingly global ideal of beauty links light skin with notions of success,

modernity, sophistication and desirability, which is perpetuated and reinforced by mass media. Some argue that this has contributed to a form of social hierarchy within and between racial/ethnic groups based on skin colour. For instance, women report using skin lightening products to increase their status and attractiveness, to secure a job or because it is perceived as fashionable.³ Research also supports the perception that the preference for lighter skin has social, economic and political implications, which has been termed 'colourism' or 'pigmentocracy'.⁴ Although used by women of all classes and education levels, adverse health impacts disproportionately affect poor women who are more likely to purchase dangerous products. Debate about the use of skin lightening products has increased recently and there has been organised protest and public health campaigns in several countries, including Senegal, Jamaica and Ghana.

Adverse Health Impacts

It is unlikely that using skin lightening products obtained from reputable sources would result in serious health effects if used according to guidelines. Patients treated under medical supervision can be advised of risks and how to minimise them. The main health risks arise from using products that do not conform to safety standards. Consequences of inappropriate use of lightening treatments or those containing active ingredients in excess of safe levels or illegal ingredients are: permanent skin bleaching; development of visible blood vessels; thinning of the skin; uneven, patchy skin colour; and redness, stinging and irritation.⁵ If treatment is discontinued, the skin may not return to its original colour. Stripping the skin of melanin makes it much more sensitive to the sun and can lead to an increased risk of skin cancer. Excessive use of steroids can also lead to hormonal disorders as the active ingredients affect naturally occurring steroid hormones. Side effects of excess use of hydroquinone include liver and nerve damage. Mercury is toxic and can cause kidney damage and fetal abnormalities if used in pregnancy.

UK Regulation

The sale of illegal skin lightening treatments is a problem in some parts of the UK. Southwark Council Trading Standards has seized sub-standard and counterfeit cosmetics and prosecuted businesses.¹ Hackney Council Trading Standards is seeking to establish a co-ordinated approach to sharing intelligence between authorities to target offending businesses. Public Health England has produced guidance on skin lightening creams for the public and doctors. Regulation of cosmetic products and medicines is described in POSTnote 444, Cosmetic Procedures.⁶

Endnotes

- 1 www.southwark.gov.uk
- 2 Li et al, 2008. Skin lightening. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 35: 444-449.
- 3 Kpanake et al, 2010. Skin Bleaching. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 36(3): 350-368.
- 4 Hunter, M, 2005. *Race, Gender and the Politics of Skin Tone*. New York: Routledge.
- 5 www.britishskinfoundation.org.uk
- 6 www.parliament.uk/post