

Fact Sheet

Skin lightening products containing the ingredients hydroquinone or mercury may cause harm. The over-the-counter sale of these products is illegal in the U.S. Read skin product labels to identify ingredients and consult with your health care provider about treatment options.

Office of Minority Health and Health Equity

What are skin lightening products?

Skin lightening products are marketed as treatments for uneven skin tone, acne, age spots, freckles, and wrinkles. Companies may describe skin lightening products as skin bleaching, fading, evening, brightening, or whitening products.

These products are often sold in the form of creams, lotions, soaps, and powders in shops catering to Hispanic/Latino, Asian, African, or Middle Eastern communities.

What are hydroquinone and mercury?

Hydroquinone and mercury are ingredients added to skin lightening products to limit the skin's production of melanin. Melanin is the pigment responsible for skin color. When you apply skin products with hydroquinone or mercury to your skin, your body absorbs these ingredients. With continued use, hydroquinone and mercury can build up in your body, which may cause harm.



The FDA has received reports of serious side effects from the use of hydroquinone, including rashes, facial swelling, and permanent skin discoloration (ochronosis). Mercury is a highly toxic metal that can damage the nervous, digestive, and immune systems, as well as the lungs, kidneys, skin, and eyes.

Does the FDA regulate the sale of skin lightening products with hydroquinone or mercury?

Skin lightening products containing hydroquinone are not approved for over-the-counter sale. However, you can get a prescription skin product containing hydroquinone from your health care provider. The use of mercury in skin lightening products is banned.

How do I know which skin lightening products contain hydroquinone or mercury?

When purchasing a skin lightening product, check the product label to see if it contains hydroquinone or mercury. Do not purchase over-the-counter skin lightening products containing these ingredients. Note that mercury may be listed as **mercurous chloride, calomel, mercuric, mercurio, or Hg**.

What else should I consider when purchasing an over-the-counter skin lightening product?

Some illegal skin lightening products containing hydroquinone or mercury may not list these ingredients on the label. Avoid products with handmade labels, labels in languages other than English, or no label at all. Products like these are in violation of FDA regulations and may be harmful.

Where can I learn more?

Get the Skin Facts! about skin product safety by visiting www.fda.gov/SkinFacts.

If you experience a bad reaction from the use of a skin product, please contact your health care provider. Report it to the FDA at www.fda.gov/medwatch/report.htm or by calling **1-800-FDA-1088**.

For more information on health equity, visit www.fda.gov/healthequity.