



FDA will probe skin creams for mercury

Agency responds to Tribune tests that found high levels

By Ellen Gabler and Sam Roe

TRIBUNE REPORTERS

The Food and Drug Administration said Friday it will investigate skin-lightening creams for dangerous amounts of mercury.

Responding to a Tribune investigation that found high levels of the toxic metal in some creams, the FDA said it has alerted its district offices about potentially hazardous products and will take enforcement action if necessary.

“We didn’t know there was that kind of a risk, and we believe now there is a level of risk,” FDA spokesman Ira Allen said. “We are going to follow up.”

Allen said he could not provide specifics of the agency’s investigation but that it might include testing samples and inspecting facilities.

The Tribune reported Wednesday that the newspaper had sent 50 creams used to lighten skin and fade age spots to a certified lab for testing, most of them bought in Chicago stores. Six were found to contain



Kelly Klein of Columbia Analytical Services in Kelso, Wash., tests skin-lightening creams for mercury. The tests were conducted for the Tribune. SOL NEELMAN/PHOTO FOR THE TRIBUNE

FDA to investigate skin-lightening creams

Continued from Page 1

amounts of mercury banned by federal law. Of those, five had more than 6,000 parts per million of mercury — enough to potentially cause kidney damage over time, according to a medical expert.

The market for skin lighteners is booming. Many consumers use the creams to diminish age spots and freckles or to even out skin tone.

Others want to lighten their entire face or bodies. Some people of Asian, Hispanic and African heritage use the creams because lighter skin can be considered a status symbol in their cultures.

Mercury is banned in

Send us your tips



We want to hear from you. Send us tips for stories you think need to be investigated. E-mail us at watchdog@tribune.com

skin-bleaching or lightening creams. The metal blocks production of melanin, which gives skin its pigmentation. But mercury can be rapidly absorbed through the skin and cause severe health effects, including neurological and kidney damage.

Ellen Silbergeld, a professor of environmental health science at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, said she was troubled by the high amounts of mercury found by the Tribune. "It's highly appropriate that (the FDA) take action," she said.

Michael Bender, head of the Mercury Policy Project, a leading advocacy group based in Vermont, said the FDA should randomly test creams, including those sold online. He also called on the agency to alert local and state health departments as well as develop a fact sheet to be used by doctors and posted in stores.

"The word needs to get out," he said. "This is a serious risk."

The Tribune's tests were among only a handful ever conducted for the presence of mercury in skin creams. The FDA has rarely done such testing. Agency officials said the issue of tainted skin creams has not been on its radar since 2006, when some products from the Dominican Republic were found to contain high amounts of mercury.

The FDA responded by issuing an import alert, which causes products to be detained until proven safe.

The six creams that tested high in the Tribune's investigation were manufactured in Lebanon, China, India, Pakistan and Taiwan. Four foreign manufacturers contacted by the newspaper said the tainted products sold under their names could be counterfeit.

Some sellers and suppliers wouldn't disclose where they bought the tainted creams. Others did, including Long Huynh, owner of a shop in Chinatown.

He said he bought the products online and would cooperate with the FDA's investigation. "We've worked with them before. It's not a problem at all."

egabler@tribune.com
sroe@tribune.com

FEATURE	SECTION	Pg.	FEATURE	SECTION	Pg.
Ask Amy	News	15	Jumble	News	19
Books	News	12	Letters	News	11
Bridge	News	18	Live!	News	14
Business	News	8	Market Roundup	News	9
Cartoon Gallery	News	10	Movie Ads	News	15-17
Classified Ads	Sports	11	Nation & World	News	7
Comics	News	18	Pressbox	Sports	9
Crossword	News	19	Scoreboard	Sports	9
Editorials	News	10	Sudoku	News	19
Face Time	News	3	The Talk	News	3
Horoscope	News	18	Weather	Sports	12

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS

■ A memorial service for Dr. Bruce Crossan Ogilvie, whose obituary appeared in Friday's paper, has been changed to 1 p.m. June 23 in St. Philip's Episcopal Church, 785 Beulah Highway (U.S. Highway 31), Beulah, Mich.

To report errors, call the Reader Help line at 312-222-3348 or e-mail readerhelp@tribune.com.



Get 2,500 ChicagoPOINTS with today's bonus code:

LESHYB

at mychicagopoints.com/dailycode

WINNING LOTTERY NUMBERS

ILLINOIS		INDIANA	
May 21 Pick 3 midday.....	791	May 22 Lotto jackpot.....	\$8.75M
May 21 Pick 4 midday.....	9865	May 21 Mega Millions.....	15 20 23 26 30 MB-17
May 21 Pick 3 evening.....	168	May 21 Mega Millions jackpot.....	\$54M
May 21 Pick 4 evening.....	3336	May 22 Powerball jackpot.....	\$170M
May 21 Little Lotto.....	21 22 24 28 30		

FDA's skin cream probe expanding to Calif., Va.

Elevated mercury levels discovered in some people using lightening products

By Ellen Gabler and Sam Roe

TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is broadening its investigation of skin-lightening creams after more than a dozen people using products in California and Virginia were found to have elevated levels of mercury.

State and federal health officials linked the higher mercury levels to homemade skin-lightening creams imported from Mexico.

The FDA had already begun investigating skin creams for the toxic metal after lab testing by Tribune Newspapers this month found extremely high amounts of the toxic metal in some lightening creams.

In response to the findings, the agency said it alerted its district offices about potentially hazardous products and would take enforcement action if necessary.

Agency spokesman Ira Allen said Friday that problems in California and Virginia give enforcement officers more products to follow up on.

Health officials in California found that a family using skin-lightening creams from Mexico had developed elevated mercury levels. Relatives and friends in other parts of California and in Virginia were using the creams too.

Even some children in the families

Fair skin, foul ingredient

What are the creams for? Skin-bleaching or lightening creams are used to lighten complexions, eliminate age spots or diminish freckles.

Why mercury? Though banned, the toxic metal is sometimes added illegally because it blocks production of melanin, which gives skin its pigmentation.

What's the danger? Mercury is rapidly absorbed through the skin and can cause severe health effects, including neurological and kidney damage.

showed high mercury amounts. One child was using the cream for acne, while other children were exposed after being touched by adults who had the creams on their hands, health officials said.

One woman in California reported symptoms associated with mercury poisoning, including numbness in her fingers, dizziness and forgetfulness, said Dr. Rick Kreutzer of the California Department of Public Health.

In its investigation, Tribune Newspapers sent 50 creams purchased throughout Chicago to a certified lab for testing. Six of the creams were found to contain amounts of mercury banned by federal law. Of those, five had more than 6,000 parts per million of mercury — enough to potentially cause kidney damage over time, according to a medical expert.

egabler@tribune.com

TRIBUNE UPDATE

Bill calls for stricter cosmetics rules

FDA would OK ingredients, run regular testing

By Ellen Gabler and Sam Roe
TRIBUNE REPORTERS

Illinois Rep. Jan Schakowsky introduced legislation Tuesday that would toughen safety standards for cosmetics, including requiring regular government testing of products for hazardous ingredients.

The call for testing of cosmetics — from shampoo to lipstick to deodorant — was sparked by a Tribune investigation in May that found some skin-lightening creams contained extremely high amounts of mercury, a toxic metal banned in those products.

“Consumers can’t assume even when an ingredient has been banned that it’s not in a product,” Schakowsky said. “That’s a really, really important finding.”

The Food and Drug Administration said it currently tests high-risk products but acknowledged that officials had not tested skin creams for mercury in years.

The metal is sometimes illegally added to creams because it blocks melanin that gives skin pigmentation. The products are used to lighten complexions and diminish freckles or age spots.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., is working on a similar bill in the Senate.

Schakowsky’s legislation would require that the FDA decide which ingredients can be used in cosmetics and personal care products. Currently, companies decide which ingredients are safe for their products, with a few exceptions.

Consumer advocates say it isn’t smart to allow an industry to police itself. But the cosmetic industry’s own trade group announced last week that it, too, is interested in having a formal process for the FDA to review the safety of in-



Kelly Klein, of Columbia Analytical Services in Kelso, Wash., adds a reagent to skin cream samples before testing for mercury. Under current law, companies decide which ingredients are safe for products. SOL NEELMAN/PHOTO FOR THE TRIBUNE

redients. The Personal Care Products Council said it was responding to American consumers who want more transparency.



Schakowsky

Schakowsky’s bill also calls for stricter labeling requirements and gives

the FDA the ability to order recalls of dangerous products. The agency can currently only request a product recall.

Reps. Edward Markey, D-Mass., and Tammy Bald-

win, D-Wis., are co-sponsors of the bill.

Schakowsky, a Democrat, said she has been especially bothered that loopholes in the law permit companies to avoid disclosing all ingredients in their products; for example, they can withhold information on specific ingredients in fragrances.

Lisa Archer, national coordinator for the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics, said more than 12,500 chemicals are found in personal care products, but the average consumer has no way of knowing which are safe.

Archer said the organization, which is made up of groups concerned about chemicals in cosmetics, did

its own testing and found carcinogens, including formaldehyde, in children’s bath products and hormone disruptors in fragrances.

She said the majority of regulations for cosmetics were enacted more than 70 years ago. “There is obvious agreement that this industry needs more regulation,” she said.

Schakowsky’s office did not provide a cost estimate for the additional regulations but said costs would be mostly financed with fees paid by manufacturers. Only manufacturers with more than \$1 million in sales would have to pay, and fees would vary by company size.

HEALTHKEY™
chicagotribune.com/health

Find health stories, tools, resources, expert advice and more.

Tribune sent 50 creams to a certified lab for testing. Six were found to contain amounts of mercury banned by federal law.

Of those, five had more than 6,000 parts per million of mercury — enough to potentially cause kidney damage over time, according to a medical expert. Mercury is rapidly absorbed through the skin and can cause severe health problems, including neurological and kidney damage.

After the testing, the FDA launched an investigation into the problem and subsequently widened its probe when elevated mercury levels were found in more than a dozen people using skin lighteners in California and Virginia. The results of the FDA inquiry are pending. The Tribune story also led several retailers and distributors to stop selling the tainted products.

egabler@tribune.com
sroe@tribune.com

Today on Chicago's
WGN RADIO 720

Blago's bombshell today.
John Williams
9 am - 1 pm

Chicagoland's **Hot** Mortgage Rates
are at **BankFinancial.com**

30 Year Fixed Mortgage

