

HEALTH ADVISORY: DSHS Warns of Mercury Poisoning Linked to Tainted Skin Creams

January 21, 2020

Background:

The Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) is warning the public of skin creams containing mercury. Mercury has been found in some skin creams made, altered, or sold in Mexico and other countries.

In one case, an individual in Texas was diagnosed with mercury poisoning after using a product purchased in Mexico that was labeled as Pond's skin cream. The mercury was **not** added by the original manufacturer but by a third party, presumably in Mexico. A similar case of mercury poisoning through skin cream has recently been identified in California, and Texas has had others in the past. Skin creams containing mercury claim to lighten the skin, treat acne, or fade freckles, blemishes, and age spots.

Mercury is dangerous and can cause adverse health effects in both adults and children. Products containing mercury are especially of concern for pregnant women or nursing mothers, because mercury may be passed on to fetuses and infants.

Clinical Presentation:

The symptoms associated with mercury poisoning are often non-specific, and thus, pose difficulties for diagnosis. Due to this, it is often misdiagnosed and leads to clinical treatments that do not address the underlying mercury poisoning.

General symptoms of mercury poisoning may include shaking, tremors, impaired balance or coordination, headaches, hypertension, depression, insomnia, weight loss, fatigue, nervousness, irritability, anxiety, memory loss, difficulty concentrating, or numbness or tingling in hands, feet, lips.

In children, prolonged exposure to mercury poisoning may present as excessive salivation or thirst, gingivitis, irritability, anorexia, poor muscle tone, leg cramps, hypertension, rash, peeling or flaking skin, or pink extremities (e.g. hands and feet).

Long term exposure to mercury may cause damage to the gastrointestinal tract, nervous system and kidneys. Symptoms may present as extreme fatigue, muscle aches, weakness, and sores in the mouth, in addition to the symptoms listed above.

Recommendations for Clinicians:

Health care providers should:

- Ask patients suspected of mercury poisoning if they use skin creams purchased in Mexico or other countries.
- If the product was **not** purchased from a major retailer in Mexico or other countries, or was unsealed upon purchase, urge patients to stop use immediately.
- Ensure the skin cream container is tightly closed, isolated in a sealed bag, and labeled, "**Mercury**: Do Not Touch".
- Contact the Texas Poison Center Network at 1-800-222-1222 for queries about mercury poisoning medical management.

If a patient is suspected of using skin creams containing mercury, DSHS recommends healthcare providers conduct mercury analysis on blood and urine specimens.

Recommendations for Public:

People should only purchase skin care products in original, sealed containers sold by reputable retailers.

Individuals who believe they may have been exposed to mercury through skin creams should contact their healthcare provider, or the Texas Poison Center Network at 1-800-222-1222.

If individuals have skin cream products containing mercury in their home, then the closed containers should be discarded at a household hazardous waste facility. If there is not a household hazardous waste facility available in their community, then the product may be tightly closed, placed in a sealed and labeled bag, and discarded with household garbage.

To find a household hazardous waste facility near you, please visit: https://www.tceq.texas.gov/assets/public/assistance/hhw/hhw_contacts.pdf

Reporting to Public Health:

To report suspected cases, please contact your local health department:

Bexar County Residents:

San Antonio Metropolitan Health District
Epidemiology Program
Phone: (210) 207-8876
Fax: (210) 207-8807

Residents of Other Counties:

Texas Department of State Health Services
Public Health Region 8
Phone: (210) 949-2121
Fax: (210) 692-1457