



**Florida Department of Health and the Florida Poison Information Center Network (FPICN)  
Mercury exposure from Skin-Lightening Products  
Fact Sheet for Health Care Providers (March 2012)**

These internationally-obtained products are either sold illegally in the United States (and can be obtained without a prescription) or purchased in another country to be brought back to the US for personal use.

**Who is at risk?**

- Patients using skin-lightening products that may contain mercury, including pregnant or nursing women and children.

**Signs and symptoms (may include):**

- Rash
- Hypertension, edema, uremia (due to tubular and glomerular renal injury)
- Paresthesias, nervousness, irritability, tremors, memory loss, depression, weight loss, fatigue

**Recommendations for doctors:**

- Include questions about skin-lightening cream use in patient history.
- Discuss skin-lightening product use with patient. Mercury (sometimes labeled as 'calomel', 'mercuric', 'mercurous', or 'mercurio') may be the active ingredient in these products.
- Conduct standard disease workup. Include inorganic mercury exposure in differential diagnoses of renal and neurological diseases.
- Stopping use of skin-lightening cream and treatment of symptoms should resolve most minor renal or neurological symptoms if disease is mercury related.
- For symptomatic patients, please contact the Florida Poison Information Center Network (FPICN) at 1-800-222-1222 for consultation with a poison specialist and/or toxicologist.
- Contact the Department of Health through the County Health Department to report all cases of mercury poisonings.

**Recommendations for patients using these creams:**

- Read the labels of all skin-lightening products, and avoid products that either list mercury as an ingredient or list no ingredients at all. Be suspicious. *The safest course of action is to discontinue use of all skin-lightening products not used at the direction of a dermatologist.*
- Dispose of these products at a household hazardous waste site.  
(<http://www.dep.state.fl.us/waste/categories/hazardous/pages/household.htm> )

**Who should be tested for mercury poisoning?**

- Most patients will require no testing; the most effective treatment is discontinuation of use.
- No specific blood or urine level correlates well with toxicity. Cases exist of profound toxicity with low exposure levels, and cases also exist with no symptoms or end organ damage with high levels.
- A 24-hour urine collection in an acid-washed container will provide the most accurate measure of mercury exposure; however, a spot urine should be sufficient for screening in most cases.

**How should I treat inorganic mercury poisoning?**

- The most effective treatment is to end the exposure.
- Severe mercury poisoning can be treated with chelation after careful assessment of risk/benefit. Chelation treatment of asymptomatic or mildly symptomatic patients is unlikely to benefit patients, and may actually be harmful.
- Consult with a medical toxicologist or another experienced medical specialist (nephrologists, occupational physician) or contact the Florida Poison Information Center Network staff before initiating chelation treatment.

**Where can I obtain more information?**

- Contact the Regional Poison Center toll-free at 1-800-222-1222
- FDA Consumer updates available at:  
<http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm294849.htm>  
<http://www.fda.gov/downloads/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/UCM294876.pdf>