

Unveiling the Shadows: Navigating the Unseen Realities of Skin Lightening Creams

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Abstract: The pursuit of lighter skin tones has driven many individuals to explore the realm of skin-lightening creams. These products promise a radiant complexion, yet beneath the surface lies a complex landscape of potential side effects. From kidney and liver damage to blood composition alterations and impacts on the nervous system, there are numerous health consequences associated with skin lightening creams that we should be aware of. Additionally, it sheds light on the psychological repercussions and the market trends driving the industry. This exploration underscores the importance of informed choices when considering these products, prioritizing long-term health and well-being over fleeting cosmetic gains.

Keywords: Skin lightening creams, Side effects, Health risk, Beauty standards, Psychological impact.

INTRODUCTION

In a world where beauty standards are nuanced and varied, using skin-lightening creams has become a common, yet frequently disregarded, habit. "Unveiling the shadows" explores the hidden sides of this beauty ritual, the implications it bears in our multicultural society and the hidden reality that lies behind the allure of skin lightening. From pigmentation irregularities to long-term health concerns, the side effects of skin lightening creams are complex and warrant a closer examination. This article will dissect the various adverse outcomes, ranging from skin irritation to the continuance of harmful beauty standards. By navigating through the intricate landscape of these consequences, we aim to foster a deeper understanding of the potential risks that accompany the pursuit of a lighter complexion. Join us as we unravel the complexities surrounding the side effects of skin lightening creams, shedding light on an aspect of the beauty industry often obscured by its dazzling promises.

SOME FACTS ON SKIN LIGHTENING

Skin lightening is the practice of lightening the darker skin tone to a paler, thus appearing white and fair. The reason behind our dark skin is the pigment called Melanin produced by melanocytes. So, what the skin lightening products do is that they reduce this Melanin in our skin thus appearing white¹ by inhibiting tyrosinase, an enzyme involved in melanin synthesis.

Various types of skin-lightening creams are available with natural, semi-synthetic, and synthetic ingredients. But they also contain toxic substances like mercury, hydroquinone, and steroids that may cause serious health complications. A study done by Agarwal et al found that almost 50% of the 23 skin fairness creams tested that are marketed in India contained steroids harmful to skin². The reasons behind why are diverse, multifaceted, and frequently entwined, but the perception that lighter skin indicates a person of higher

socioeconomic status, or physical beauty than their darker-skinned counterpart is the overarching theme².

In the current scenario, social media play a crucial role in deluding people by scattering wrong ideology about skin color, thus making them eager to try those products that are available in the market without any guidance³. The young generation falls for this misapprehension and uses these creams without asking for directions from a doctor. According to a report by Future Market Insights, the skin-lightening product market value in 2023 is US\$ 19,225.9 million and is predicted to reach US\$ 37,916.3 in 2033⁴. This industry is one of the fastest-growing markets in Asia and Africa⁵.

In pursuit of fairer skin, many individuals turn to skin-whitening products that promise quick results. However, it is essential to be aware of the potential risks associated with these products. While they may provide temporary lightening effects, certain skin whitening creams can have harmful effects on vital organs when used inappropriately or for prolonged periods. This article aims to shed light on the potential side effects of skin whitening creams on the human body.

1. Kidneys:

One of the major organs susceptible to harm from skin whitening creams is the kidneys. Certain creams containing mercury as an active ingredient can lead to kidney damage. Mercury is a toxic heavy metal that can accumulate in the body, impairing kidney function over time. Prolonged exposure to mercury-containing creams may result in kidney dysfunction or even renal failure. Membranous nephropathy and tubular necrosis are some of the nephrotic complications.

In February and June of this year, a large number of male and female patients with a very unusual form of membranous nephropathy (MN), a kidney disease that causes the body to release

too much protein in the urine, began to appear before the nephrologists at Aster MIMS, Kottakkal, Kerala. The doctors were fascinated by this, and upon more investigation, they discovered that the majority of these patients had begun using skin-lightening or fairness creams that included heavy metals⁶.

2. Liver:

Skin whitening cosmetics can also negatively impact the liver, which is in charge of metabolism and detoxification. Liver damage has been linked to high hydroquinone levels. Hepatotoxicity or liver malfunction may result from the overuse or extended application of hydroquinone-containing creams⁷. In the liver, hydroquinone is metabolized to glucuronide and sulphate before being oxidized to p-benzoquinone, particularly in the bone marrow. P-benzoquinone is known to initiate carcinogenesis and to cause certain mutations.

3. Blood:

Every product we apply to our reaches the bloodstream and rapidly spreads throughout the body. Corticosteroids found in skin-whitening lotions have been related to negative effects on blood composition. Use of these lotions for a prolonged period can cause immunosuppression thus weakening blood vessels, raising the risk of blood clots, and lower red blood cell counts. The general state of cardiovascular health may be significantly impacted by such alterations⁷.

4. Nervous System:

Hydroquinone and mercury in some skin-whitening creams are found to affect the nervous system. Neural symptoms such as peripheral neuropathy, tingling, or numbness may arise from prolonged exposure to these substances. Because the nervous system is so sensitive, any interference can result in health problems that last a lifetime⁷. Mercury with prolonged dermal exposure can lead to accumulation in the central nervous system.

5. Hypersensitivity Reactions

Skin lightening creams frequently include strong ingredients that can cause hypersensitivity reactions. From minor irritability to serious illnesses like contact dermatitis, these reactions can vary widely. Adverse reactions are more likely to occur in people with sensitive skin or those who already have skin conditions⁷.

6. Carcinogenic Concerns

Several ingredients found in skin-lightening creams, such as hydroquinone, may have carcinogenic properties. Skin cancer risk increases with prolonged exposure to these substances. This highlights the significance of comprehending the long-term effects of utilizing such products⁷.

7. Mercury poisoning

Although mercury is prohibited in many nations, it is a well-known ingredient in some skin-lightening creams. Mercury poisoning, which can result from prolonged exposure to mercury, can cause symptoms like kidney and neurological damage. The potential long-term health effects of these products are a serious concern due to the skin's ability to absorb mercury⁸.

8. Psychological impact

In addition to the potential hazards to one's physical health, using skin-lightening creams may also have psychological repercussions. People may ignore the possible health risks in their quest for lighter skin due to social pressure to adhere to particular beauty standards. When assessing the total effect of these products on

well-being, it is imperative to take this psychological cost into account.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

We should always be cautious of what we introduce into our bodies to live a healthy life. To make sure you select a safe and efficient product, it's crucial to take into account several factors when searching for a good face whitening cream. These pointers will assist you in choosing a quality face-whitening product:

1. **Ingredients:** Examine the product's packaging for an ingredient list. Seek for components that are recognized for their ability to brighten skin, such as vitamin C, kojic acid, niacinamide, arbutin, or native botanical extracts like licorice extract, aloesin, hesperidin, mulberry. All of them inhibit tyrosinase activity and melanin formation⁹. Avoid creams that contain harmful ingredients like hydroquinone, mercury, or steroids, as they can have adverse effects on your skin.

2. **Reputation and Brand:** Choose goods from brands with a solid track record that are well-known. Examine the brand's background, ratings, and reviews from customers to gauge the efficacy and quality of the offering. Check for regulatory authority approvals or certifications.

3. **SPF Protection:** The primary cause of skin cancer is excessive exposure to ultraviolet radiation from the sun. Sunscreen can effectively lower the incidence of skin cancer when used correctly and frequently. Sun protection should be a feature of a good face whitening cream. Seek for a cream that has a minimum SPF (Sun Protection Factor) of 30 and is broad-spectrum. Always remember the 'Two Finger' rule when applying sunscreen. Take an adequate amount on your two fingers and apply it on your face and neck¹⁰.

4. **Skin Type:** Take into account your skin type while selecting a whitening product. Certain skin types, like oily, dry, combination, or sensitive skin, are catered for in the formulation of certain creams. To reduce the possibility of unfavorable reactions, choose a product that is appropriate for your skin type. Wrong products on the wrong skin can also cause severe hypersensitivity reactions.

5. **Patch Test:** It is necessary to test a cream before you administer it to your face as it may cause a burning sensation or allergic reactions. Test a small area of your skin with the cream before using it all over your face. This will assist you in identifying any product sensitivities or allergic reactions you may have. For the patch test, follow the instructions provided by the manufacturer.

6. **Recommendations and Reviews:** Consult reputable sources, like dermatologists or skincare specialists, for recommendations. Their insights and guidance on selecting a dependable and efficient face whitening cream can be extremely beneficial.

Bear in mind that face-whitening products might not offer immediate or dramatic effects. Using these products requires patience and consistency. For maximum effects, use the whitening cream in conjunction with a healthy skincare regimen that includes frequent cleansing, exfoliation, and moisturizing. A dermatologist can provide you with individualized advice if you have any concerns or particular skin conditions.

In the pursuit of fairer skin, it is crucial to acknowledge the potential dangers lurking beneath the allure of skin-lightening creams. This comprehensive examination of the side effects on various organs, coupled with the psychological impact and market

dynamics, highlights the need for informed choices in skincare. Prioritizing health and well-being over temporary cosmetic gains is essential. Consulting with dermatologists or healthcare professionals is a prudent step for those considering such treatments. Let us champion diverse standards of beauty, foster acceptance for all skin tones, and ensure that our pursuit of beauty never compromises our long-term health.

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