

## Toxic Mercury Levels in Face Cream

The Division of Emerging Health Issues and Environmental Toxicology Section are working with the Illinois Poison Center, clinical partners, and a local health department on a cluster of mercury poisoning cases currently linked through shared household exposure. Mercury contamination of a potentially adulterated Ponds facial cream from Mexico has been



laboratory confirmed and reported to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Since 2010, cosmetics with mercury content above 1 part per million (ppm), especially skin-lightening soaps and creams, have elicited public health concern due to reports of serious illness. Many but not all countries have banned the intentional use of mercury in cosmetics and related products, although such bans normally exclude eye area cosmetics. It is important to know that reports, such as for this exposure, are that product in commercial-looking containers have been adulterated to potentially enhance skin lightening and this adulteration may be the source of mercury in the product.

A woman has been hospitalized in a semi-comatose state after using a Pond's cream that contained mercury. The source of mercury in the face cream is currently unknown. The family reports the product was given to them by a family member in Mexico, so sales in Illinois have not been established.

Mexican Pond's cream adulterated with mercury in 2024

However, based on numerous face creams from Mexico being found to have mercury in them, caution about use is paramount.

While mercury poisoning is not a reportable condition in Illinois, we encourage providers to be aware that cases of poisoning from use of contaminated face or body cream have been reported from at least five states now. The CDC mercury poisoning case definition is met when whole blood mercury levels ( $>10 \mu\text{g/L}$ ) are detected. The IDPH Environmental Toxicology

Section can screen for mercury vapor in household potentially impacted by mercury contamination. Previous investigations in California have identified substantial environmental contamination in households where these types of products have been used, often for years.

Contact [dph.tox@illinois.gov](mailto:dph.tox@illinois.gov) to triage environmental screening needs.

To report a case to the FDA, [MedWatch: The FDA Safety Information and Adverse Event Reporting Program](#).

To consult with Illinois Poison Center medical toxicologists on patient testing and care, call 1-800-222-1222.

**Mercury poisoning signs and symptoms can be non-specific** but may include those in the table below. If patients are using a suspect cream, IDPH recommends conducting a total mercury analysis in blood and urine.

General Signs and Symptoms	Children with prolonged exposure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Difficulty concentrating, memory loss</li><li>• Nervousness, irritability, anxiety</li><li>• Depression, insomnia</li><li>• Headaches, Hypertension</li><li>• Weight loss, fatigue</li><li>• Shaking, tremors, paresthesias, ataxia</li><li>• Numbness or tingling in hands, feet, lips</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pink hands and feet, flaking skin</li><li>• Excessive saliva or thirst, gum disease (gingivitis)</li><li>• Irritability, poor appetite</li><li>• Poor muscle tone, leg cramps</li><li>• High blood pressure</li><li>• Rash</li></ul>

Treatment for patients with >10 µg/L mercury in whole blood may include succimer. Patients with very high concentrations of mercury and symptoms of severe neurologic sequelae may need DMPS from a compounded pharmacy.

**Resources:**

1. [Mercury in Skin Creams \(fact sheet in multiple languages, FAQ\) \(ca.gov\)](#)
2. [Minnesota Department of Health - Skin Lightening Products Found to Contain Mercury \(alerts, fact sheets, and a photographic list of tested products\)](#)
3. [CDC: Poison Center and Public Health Collaborations Community of Practice Newsletter \(cdc.gov\)](#)
4. [Mercury Poisoning Linked to Skin Products | FDA Dial 1-888-INFO-FDA \(1-888-463-6332\) or the FDA Consumer Complaint Coordinator in Illinois, 312-353-7840.](#)

The Pediatric Environmental Health Specialty Unit (PEHSU) at the Great Lakes Center for Reproductive and Children’s Environmental Health can also offer guidance. To reach the PEHSU call 312-355-0597.