

## **The ISP Investigates: Black Hair Care Products**

Erin DeJan, "Black Hair under Chemical Attack," 2023

Leila Williams, "Black Hair Care Is More Dangerous Than We Think," 2023

## Black Hair Under Chemical Attack

Imagine you're a healthy young woman who is finally ready to start the family you've always dreamed of, so you go to a fertility clinic to do things the proper way. However, while you're there, the doctor says something about how your ultrasound looks off. The doctor sends you to an oncologist for further observation. The oncologist diagnoses you with uterine cancer, and a month later you are forced to have a hysterectomy to save your life. Your dream of having children is gone.

That's what happened to Jennifer Mitchell, a 28-year-old black woman from Missouri.<sup>1</sup> Mitchell was confused by her diagnosis, as she was young and had no family history of uterine cancer.<sup>2</sup> While searching for answers about what might have caused her cancer, she learned of a new study that linked hair products used by black women to endocrine-disrupting and asthma-associated chemicals. Repeated exposure to these chemicals was linked to adverse health outcomes like early puberty, premature labor, diabetes, breast cancer, and uterine cancer.<sup>3</sup>

After reading this study, Mitchell believed she'd found the answer to why she could never have children of her own. She'd been an avid user of hair straightening products marketed to black women since she was 8 years old.<sup>4</sup>

“As most young African-American girls, chemical relaxers, chemical straighteners were introduced to us at a young age,” she said at a recent news conference. “Society has made it a norm to look a certain way, in order to feel a certain way. And I am the first voice of many voices to come that will stand, stand up to these companies, and say, ‘No more.’”<sup>5</sup>

Companies such as L’Oréal, Strength of Nature, Soft Sheen Carson, Dabur, and Namaste Laboratories sell hair relaxers<sup>6</sup> that are linked to adverse health effects.<sup>7</sup> Mitchell, like most users, was under the impression that these products were safe and good for your hair. The product’s packaging includes words like “botanicals” and “ultra-nourishing” and do not clearly warn users about their potential health effects.<sup>8</sup> Who would purposely use products that could cause premature menopause, cancer, or infertility?

“I felt deceived. I felt hurt. I felt like I’ve been lied to my whole life,” Mitchell told *The Washington Post*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark, Julian. “She was diagnosed with cancer at 28. Her lawsuit blames hair relaxers.”

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/10/27/loreal-lawsuit-hair-straightener-relaxer/>

<sup>2</sup> Mark, Julian. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/10/27/loreal-lawsuit-hair-straightener-relaxer/>

<sup>3</sup> James-Todd, T., Connolly, L., Preston, E. V., Quinn, M. R., Plotan, M., Xie, Y., Gandhi, B., & Mahalingaiah, S. “Hormonal activity in commonly used Black hair care products: evaluating hormone disruption as a plausible contribution to health disparities. *Journal of exposure science & environmental epidemiology*.”

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41370-021-00335-3>

<sup>4</sup> Howard, Jacqueline. “US woman files lawsuit against L’Oréal, claiming chemical hair straightening products are linked to her cancer.” <https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/24/health/hair-straightening-products-lawsuit/index.html>

<sup>5</sup> Howard, Jacqueline. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/24/health/hair-straightening-products-lawsuit/index.html>

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Mitchell’s Filed Lawsuit. <https://www.classaction.org/media/mitchell-v-loreal-usa-inc-et-al.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> James-Todd, T. et al. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41370-021-00335-3>

<sup>8</sup> Mark, Julian. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/10/27/loreal-lawsuit-hair-straightener-relaxer/>

<sup>9</sup> Mark, Julian. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/10/27/loreal-lawsuit-hair-straightener-relaxer/>

## Erin DeJan

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In 2022, Mitchell brought a lawsuit against hair care product manufacturers L'Oréal and Strength of Nature.<sup>10</sup> In it, she claimed that the companies withheld information about their harmful health effects in order to protect their sales and reputations.<sup>11</sup>

It's not the first time that major cosmetics companies have been accused of using dangerous chemicals in their products.

In 2008<sup>12</sup>, L'Oréal's former regulatory director, Jerome Chevallier, filed a lawsuit against the company. He claimed that L'Oréal was guilty of selling products containing chemicals that were illegal to use in places like South America and Europe.<sup>13</sup> Chevallier said that some of the company's products were made with “potentially carcinogenic chemicals,”<sup>14</sup> and that others containing animal-derived ingredients had been falsely advertised as “100 percent vegan”<sup>15</sup>.

According to Chevallier, the company also purposely concealed its illegal acts, going as far as deleting formulae for products made with illegal ingredients from company computers.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, evidence is mounting that some major companies are not only deceiving their consumers about dangerous products, but also marketing them specifically to black and brown people.

For instance, pharmaceutical giant Johnson & Johnson targeted black women and girls as consumers for their talcum-based powder products as sales declined among other demographics<sup>17</sup>, even though the products were linked to ovarian cancer and other illnesses.<sup>18</sup> In an internal presentation in 2006, Johnson & Johnson identified black women as “high propensity consumers,” since 60% of black women were using baby powder compared to 30% of the total population.<sup>19</sup>

Using this knowledge, Johnson & Johnson strategically gave away gift bags including their powder products at churches, sought out black female artists like Patti LaBelle and Aretha Franklin as spokespersons, and aired a radio campaign in Southern states that targeted curvy Southern women.<sup>20</sup>

When confronted by lawsuits from black women who'd used Johnson & Johnson products, the company stated that “its talcum powder products are safe” and denied that its

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<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Mitchell's Filed Lawsuit. <https://www.classaction.org/media/mitchell-v-loreal-usa-inc-et-al.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Jennifer Mitchell's Filed Lawsuit. <https://www.classaction.org/media/mitchell-v-loreal-usa-inc-et-al.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Michels, Scott. “Lawsuit: L'Oreal Used Banned Chemicals in Foreign Sales”  
<https://abcnews.go.com/TheLaw/story?id=5389291&page=1>

<sup>13</sup> Michels, Scott. <https://abcnews.go.com/TheLaw/story?id=5389291&page=1>

<sup>14</sup> Michels, Scott. <https://abcnews.go.com/TheLaw/story?id=5389291&page=1>

<sup>15</sup> Michels, Scott. <https://abcnews.go.com/TheLaw/story?id=5389291&page=1>

<sup>16</sup> Michels, Scott. <https://abcnews.go.com/TheLaw/story?id=5389291&page=1>

<sup>17</sup> Hernandez, Joe. “Johnson & Johnson Targeted Black Women with Products Linked To Cancer, Lawsuit Says.”  
<https://www.npr.org/2021/07/29/1022355144/johnson-johnson-targeted-black-women-powder-products-cancer-lawsuit>

<sup>18</sup>James-Todd, T, et. al. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41370-021-00335-3>

<sup>19</sup> Hernandez, Joe. <https://www.npr.org/2021/07/29/1022355144/johnson-johnson-targeted-black-women-powder-products-cancer-lawsuit>

<sup>20</sup> Hernandez, Joe. <https://www.npr.org/2021/07/29/1022355144/johnson-johnson-targeted-black-women-powder-products-cancer-lawsuit>

## Erin DeJan

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products caused cancer.<sup>21</sup> However, Reuters has reported that Johnson & Johnson executives have been aware of the presence of asbestos, a known carcinogen, in their talc products since the 1970s.<sup>22</sup>

Wanda Tidline, a woman who, like Mitchell, had no family history of cancer, was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2012 after using Johnson & Johnson's baby powder for "many, many years." At a news conference, Tidline, one of the women suing Johnson & Johnson stated that "because of the advertising, I felt it was safe."<sup>23</sup>

Like all women, black women depend on their products to make them feel beautiful and to maintain their hair. But a black woman's hair is a special part of her identity.<sup>24</sup> It is an expression of self. It is a means of sharing cultural knowledge and building a community.<sup>25</sup> It is a means of becoming an entrepreneur and becoming economically free.<sup>26</sup>

Historically, however, black hair has also been politically incendiary and controlled by restrictive laws and policies.<sup>27</sup> From slavery to civil rights to the present, black women have had to figure out ways to protect themselves by altering their hair. Today, a lot of black women still feel compelled to use straightening products to be seen as feminine, beautiful, and professional in academic or work settings. Many use straightening and lighting products to fit into the Eurocentric beauty standard, which favors lighter skin, straighter hair, and smaller lips and noses.<sup>28</sup>

Mitchell, for instance, said she felt the need for her hair to "look a certain way, lay a certain way, flow a certain way in order to look professional" and to "fit in."<sup>29</sup>

Like Mitchell, many black women start using these products at a young age to tame their "nappy" hair and avoid bullying, write-ups, and even having their hair butchered by dull safety scissors at school. A 2022 study conducted by Henning et. al found that bullying and discrimination caused many black girls to try hair straightening products.<sup>30</sup> As these girls grow

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<sup>21</sup> Pietsch, Bryan. "Johnson & Johnson offers \$8.9B to settle talc baby powder claims."

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/04/04/johnson-baby-powder-talc-settlement-cancer/>

<sup>22</sup> Johnson & Johnson Investigation. <https://www.asbestos.com/companies/johnson-johnson/#:~:text=Johnson%20%26%20Johnson%20has%20always%20publicly,as%20early%20as%20the%201950s>

<sup>23</sup> Hsu, Tiffany. "Black women's group sues Johnson & Johnson over talc baby powder."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/27/business/johnson-baby-powder-black-women.html>

<sup>24</sup> Redding, Alesia. "Black Women's Hair Is about Our Identity."

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,sso&db=a9h&AN=J0E295107821623&authtype=sso&custid=s8993175&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=s8993175> .

<sup>25</sup> Bell, Monica C., "The Braiding Cases, Cultural Deference, and the Inadequate Protection of Black Women Consumers" <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1115819>

<sup>26</sup> Bell, Monica C. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1115819>

<sup>27</sup> Bell, Monica C. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1115819>

<sup>28</sup> Zota, Ami R. et al. The environmental injustice of beauty: framing chemical exposures from beauty products as a health disparities concern. *American Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology*, Volume 217, Issue 4, 418.e1 - 418.e6 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajog.2017.07.020>

<sup>29</sup> Mark, Julian. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/10/27/loreal-lawsuit-hair-straightener-relaxer/>

<sup>30</sup> Henning, Tayrn, Mel Holman, Layla Ismael, Kimberly Y. Yu, Lesley Williams, Stacie J. Shelton, Marisol Perez, "Examination of hair experiences among girls with Black/African American identities." <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2022.05.009>

## Erin DeJan

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into women, they continue using these products in hopes of escaping workplace discrimination against their natural hair.

The pressure of assimilation, the Eurocentric beauty standard, and the criticism of black hair in its natural state have all been widely documented.<sup>31</sup> Among black women, it's practically common knowledge. But while the nearly 60 corporations<sup>32</sup> being sued by black women almost certainly knew about this history, nevertheless they seem to have chosen to cut corners and sell products that do even more harm to their customers.

Black hair is a major business in the U.S. as black consumers, predominantly women, spend about 18% of their annual income on hair and personal care items.<sup>33</sup> In 2018 alone, black consumers spent \$473 million of the \$4.2 billion spent in the hair care industry.<sup>34</sup>

“The hair industry profits from hair dissatisfaction,” said Henning, “and promotes hair altering products that introduce harsh, biologically altering chemicals to girls' scalps.”<sup>35</sup>

And then there's the issue of “cultural deference”<sup>36</sup>—which, as Monica Bell at Yale Law School has argued, occurs when policymakers allow harmful actions because they are seen as typical for the culture of a certain group. Since black hair is such an integral part of black culture, some policymakers, judges, and even the Food and Drug Administration<sup>37</sup> may be less willing to police the ingredients in black hair products, even if they are hurting black women.<sup>38</sup>

“Black women have long been the victims of dangerous products specifically marketed to them,” said Mitchell's lawyer, Ben Crump. “Black hair has been and always will be beautiful, but Black women have been told they have to use these products to meet society's standards. We will likely discover that Ms. Mitchell's tragic case is one of countless cases in which companies aggressively misled black women to increase their profits.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Henning, Tayrn et. al. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2022.05.009>

<sup>32</sup> Jones, Diana. “Nearly 60 hair relaxer lawsuits against L'Oreal, others consolidated in Illinois federal court.” <https://www.reuters.com/legal/nearly-60-hair-relaxer-lawsuits-against-loreal-others-consolidated-illinois-2023-02-06/>

<sup>33</sup> Redding, Alesia.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,sso&db=a9h&AN=J0E295107821623&authtype=sso&custid=s8993175&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=s8993175> .

<sup>34</sup> Redding, Alesia.

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<sup>35</sup> Henning et. al. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2022.05.009>

<sup>36</sup> Bell, Monica C. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1115819>

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Reuters. “Hair-straightening products contain potentially toxic mix.”

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/hair-straighteners-1.4662498>

<sup>38</sup> Bell, Monica C. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1115819>

<sup>39</sup> Crump, Ben. Press Release Statement. <https://benrump.com/press/attorney-ben-crump-files-lawsuit-on-behalf-of-user-of-chemical-hair-straightening-products/>

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**Leila Williams**

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## Black Hair Care Is More Dangerous Than We Think

“Africa’s Best,” “Just for Me,” “Dark & Lovely.” Hair product companies use names like these to capture black audiences, whom these companies encourage to use their chemical straighteners on children<sup>1</sup> as young as three years old. When a brand named “African Pride” promotes a product called “Shea Miracle,” you can figure out the message they are trying to portray: this product will work wonders for the black community.

And yet, in their competition to win over black customers, many companies have harmed their black clients by including harsh chemicals in their products that, supposedly, “give better results.”<sup>2</sup>

Even for black women who try to be careful about what they buy, it's easy to be tricked by products that falsely represent themselves as “Black-owned.”<sup>3</sup> and “free of lye.”<sup>4</sup> “Africa’s Best,” “Cantu,” and “Shea Moisture,” to name a few, are popular brands in the black community that most people believe to be black-owned brands, but that are actually large, white-owned corporations<sup>5</sup>. Some companies also try to make their products sound more appealing by claiming they include less or no lye—even when it’s not true. Lye, the chemical in chemical straighteners that does the job of unwinding coils and curly hair, is also used for unclogging drains, cleaning off burned-on grime, and even dissolving animal carcasses and chemical cremation in funeral homes. According to Deborah Cutkelvin, a black hairstylist in Brooklyn, “even when [the label] says no lye, that’s not true.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hair relaxers marketed at children: <https://silentspring.org/news/hair-products-black-women-contain-mix-hazardous-ingredients>

<sup>2</sup> False Claims of No-Lye: [NADINE WHITE. \(August 4, 2021 Wednesday\). Campaign urges firms to pull ‘toxic’ hair products aimed at Black women. The Independent - Daily Edition. https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6394-R801-F072-44GW-00000-00&context=1516831. • National Institute of Health Study https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/hair-straightening-chemicals-associated-higher-uterine-cancer-risk](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/campaign-urges-firms-to-pull-toxic-hair-products-aimed-at-black-women-2021-08-04)

<sup>3</sup> Black hair products that aren’t black: <https://www.247liveculture.com/hair-and-beauty-1/are-you-really-buying-black-a-list-of-non-black-owned-hair-products>

<sup>4</sup> False Claims of no-lye: [NADINE WHITE. \(August 4, 2021 Wednesday\). Campaign urges firms to pull ‘toxic’ hair products aimed at Black women. The Independent - Daily Edition. https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6394-R801-F072-44GW-00000-00&context=1516831. • National Institute of Health Study https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/hair-straightening-chemicals-associated-higher-uterine-cancer-risk](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/campaign-urges-firms-to-pull-toxic-hair-products-aimed-at-black-women-2021-08-04)

<sup>5</sup> Sold companies to white-corporations: <https://www.newsweek.com/list-non-black-hair-brands-shea-moisture-carols-daughter-1509677>

<sup>6</sup> Deborah Cutkelvin tells us all about the lies of No-lye: <https://www.newsweek.com/2017/03/03/toxic-chemicals-cosmetics-hair-products-aimed-african-americans-559710.html>



**Leila Williams**

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It's no surprise that products with such chemicals leave professional hairstylists like Cutkelvin concerned for their clients. In an interview with the *Montgomery Advertiser*, Kim Willis, owner of Montgomery's Kimistry Hair Lab described the feeling of applying a chemical relaxer. "It feels like fire ants," said Willis. "Like your scalp is on fire, and your skin is peeling."<sup>7</sup>

Another stylist who owns a salon in Montgomery, Nicole King of "Tre'ss Bien" said in the same article, "I was the youngest Anita Baker looking child in middle school."<sup>8</sup> King had the famous singer's straight pixie cut after a chemical straightener made her hair fall out.<sup>9</sup>

Nicole King, whose mother was a cosmetologist, says she was a "guinea pig"<sup>10</sup> for multiple hair products. At sixteen, she says, she had the hormone levels equivalent to a woman in her sixties, followed by infertility issues in her early twenties<sup>11</sup>. Kim Willis developed polycystic ovary syndrome in her late teens and experienced dizziness, skin discoloration, and skin peeling during her exposure to chemical fumes and "hair lighteners" as a 32-year-old stylist<sup>12</sup>.

Studies by the National Institutes of Health have found that the use of chemical straighteners is directly proportional to the high risks of uterine cancer in black women<sup>13</sup>. Researchers have also found that permanent products like straighteners and hair dye increase risks of breast and ovarian cancer<sup>14</sup>. Another study by the Silent Spring Institute has investigated the correlation between popular black hair care products and health issues such as early puberty, preterm birth, uterine fibroids, and infertility<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> The process of chemical relaxers is painful:

<https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/2020/02/24/black-hair-careproducts-toxic-dangerous-chemicals-black-women-bre-ast-cancer-fibroidsedcs/4564877002/>

<sup>8</sup> Nicole King used chemicals, causing her hair to straighten and fall out:

<https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/2020/02/24/black-hair-careproducts-toxic-dangerous-chemicals-black-women-bre-ast-cancer-fibroidsedcs/4564877002/>

<sup>9</sup> From Texturizes to Kiddie relaxers and Optimum Super Strength:

<https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/2020/02/24/black-hair-careproducts-toxic-dangerous-chemicals-black-women-bre-ast-cancer-fibroidsedcs/4564877002/>

<sup>10</sup> King's mother experimented on her: <https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/2020/02/24/black-hair-careproducts-toxic-dangerous-chemicals-black-women-bre-ast-cancer-fibroidsedcs/4564877002/>

<sup>11</sup> King's fertility issues: <https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/2020/02/24/black-hair-careproducts-toxic-dangerous-chemicals-black-women-bre-ast-cancer-fibroidsedcs/4564877002/>

<sup>12</sup> Kim Willis & heath complications: <https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/2020/02/24/black-hair-careproducts-toxic-dangerous-chemicals-black-women-bre-ast-cancer-fibroidsedcs/4564877002/>

<sup>13</sup> National Institutes of Health on chemical straighteners: <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/hair-straightening-chemicals-associated-higher-uterine-cancer-risk>

<sup>14</sup> National Institutes of Health on other cancer risks: <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/hair-straightening-chemicals-associated-higher-uterine-cancer-risk>

<sup>15</sup> Silent Spring Institute gals heath issues: <https://silentspring.org/news/hair-products-black-women-contain-mix-hazardous-ingredients>

**Leila Williams**

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Numerous women in these studies claim to use these products for more “manageable hair” or a more “decent look<sup>16</sup>.”

Black women have always struggled when it comes to their hair and fitting into white American society. Even today, it is not uncommon for Black women to hear comments in the workplace about having “unruly hair<sup>17</sup>.” Nicole Whitehead, chief human resources officer at Auburn University, described how, when she wore her hair in protective styles such as braids, her white counterparts in her former jobs would tell her, “it doesn’t look bad. But we liked it the other way<sup>18</sup>.” According to Whitehead, that is code for “your hair is too black<sup>19</sup>.”

Many Black women have had experiences like Whitehead’s, or have been warned by their families not to let this happen. As a result, many black women turn to chemical straighteners. Jenny Mitchell of Ohio said she had been using such chemical straighteners since she was in the third grade because “as an African American woman, it is the societal norm to have your hair look a certain way<sup>20</sup>.”

Now, at the age of 32, Mitchell has filed a lawsuit against five different hair care companies after having a hysterectomy due to a diagnosis of uterine cancer<sup>21</sup>. Mitchell brought her lawsuit just one week after reading a National Cancer Institute study about the cancer risks of hair straightening chemicals<sup>22</sup>. She was, she said, “shocked” by NCI’s findings. “But at the same time, I also thought that maybe this could be an answer to my diagnosis<sup>23</sup>.”

One of the companies that Mitchell is suing, L’Oreal, argued in a similar suit in 2016 that “repeated warnings” on the packaging made clear the product’s “capacity to abuse injuries” and that “no reasonable consumer would gather that the product is not ‘caustic<sup>24</sup>.’”

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<sup>16</sup> Black users wish to meet social beauty norms: <https://silentspring.org/news/hair-products-black-women-contain-mix-hazardous-ingredients>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/2020/02/24/black-hair-careproducts-toxic-dangerous-chemicals-black-women-bre-ast-cancer-fibroidsedcs/4564877002/>

<sup>18</sup> Nicole Whitehead: <https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/2020/02/24/black-hair-careproducts-toxic-dangerous-chemicals-black-women-bre-ast-cancer-fibroidsedcs/4564877002/>

<sup>19</sup> Your hair is too black: <https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/2020/02/24/black-hair-careproducts-toxic-dangerous-chemicals-black-women-bre-ast-cancer-fibroidsedcs/4564877002/>

<sup>20</sup> Jenny Mitchell’s story: <https://www.goodmorningamerica.com/wellness/story/woman-sues-companies-allegingchemical-hair-%20straightening-products-920-07557>

<sup>21</sup> Jenny Mitchell sues: <https://www.goodmorningamerica.com/wellness/story/woman-sues-companies-allegingchemical-hair-%20straightening-products-920-07557>

<sup>22</sup> National Institutes of Health on other cancer risks: <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/hair-straightening-chemicals-associated-higher-uterine-cancer-risk>

<sup>23</sup> Mitchell’s response to NIH study: <https://www.goodmorningamerica.com/wellness/story/woman-sues-companies-allegingchemical-hair-%20straightening-products-920-07557>

<sup>24</sup> L’Oreal statement: [NADINE WHITE. \(August 4, 2021 Wednesday\). Campaign urges firms to pull ‘toxic’ hair products aimed at Black women. The Independent - Daily Edition. https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6394-R801-F072-44GW-00000-00&context=1516831](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/loreal-statement-nadine-white-august-4-2021-wednesday-campaign-urges-firms-to-pull-toxic-hair-products-aimed-at-black-women-the-independent-daily-edition-https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6394-R801-F072-44GW-00000-00&context=1516831). • National Institute of Health Study <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/hair-straightening-chemicals-associated-higher-uterine-cancer-risk>

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Dr. Tamara James-Todd is an epidemiologist who launched a study in 2004 called the Greater New York Hair Products Study<sup>25</sup>, in which she observed the most popular hair care products among black users. Todd's study showed that the more a young girl used certain hair oils, the more likely she was to experience abnormal hormonal functions<sup>26</sup>.

Todd said she conducted the study because of a case in the 90s she'd come across that involved four children from the ages of four months to four years who had already begun to develop breasts and pubic hair<sup>27</sup>. The children's pediatric endocrinologist found that all four children had used hair care products which contained estrogen. When the children's parents were told to stop using these products, the girls' breasts regressed and their public hair fell out<sup>28</sup>. A decade later, in 2004, Todd tested those same products and found parabens, phthalates and other endocrine disruptors<sup>29</sup>.

And yet, these chemicals are still the main ingredients in a lot of black hair products today<sup>30</sup>.

Dr. James-Todd produces a podcast called "Beauty + Justice," where she talks about the societal pressures that have forced black women to manipulate their hair, as well as ways to revert the damage that harsh chemicals and societal pressures have caused to the black hair industry<sup>31</sup>. "About 50 percent of products advertised to Black women contain these types of chemicals," James-Todd points out, "compared to maybe only seven percent that are advertised to white women<sup>32</sup>."

The black hair care industry has been growing for more than a century, starting with Madame C.J. Walker, a black activist who led a movement to create healthy hair care products for black women in 1917<sup>33</sup>. But in the early 2000s, the industry's sales grew more and more. According to the Statista Research Department, in 2014 sales increased by 10 percent for "Smart Perm," by 13.7 percent for "Luster's Pink ShortLooks," and by 15.4 percent for "African Pride Olive Miracle<sup>34</sup>."

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<sup>25</sup> Dr. Tamara James-Todd's Study: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4116338/>

<sup>26</sup> Todd's Conclusion: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4116338/>

<sup>27</sup> Case of early hormonal developments: <https://www.loe.org/shows/segments.html?programID=23-P13-00007&segmentID=7>

<sup>28</sup> Reason for early hormonal developments: <https://www.loe.org/shows/segments.html?programID=23-P13-00007&segmentID=7>

<sup>29</sup> Todd's testing: <https://www.loe.org/shows/segments.html?programID=23-P13-00007&segmentID=7>

<sup>30</sup> Ingredients of hair products:

<sup>31</sup> Todd's podcast: <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/james-toddlab/beauty-justice-podcast-0>

<sup>32</sup> The odds of Black women vs White women: <https://www.loe.org/shows/segments.html?programID=23-P13-00007&segmentID=7>

<sup>33</sup> Madame C.J. Walker poster: <https://www.loe.org/shows/segments.html?programID=23-P13-00007&segmentID=7>

<sup>34</sup> Statistics of popular black hair products in 2014: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/315501/sales-growth-top-ethnic-hair-brands-us/>

**Leila Williams**

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Some companies have even developed chemical hair relaxers for black children, with names like “Just for Me.” Little black girls face challenges when they realize their hair is different from girls of other ethnicities—and when they reach a certain age, they often become self-conscious about it<sup>35</sup>. Many girls ask their parents to “fix” their hair<sup>36</sup>; however the chemical products that can accomplish this simultaneously increase their risk of early-onset puberty and later, breast or ovarian cancer<sup>37</sup>.

These products could potentially impact entire communities. Because many black women do not have access to good health care<sup>38</sup>, they tend to endure and develop more aggressive forms of diseases<sup>39</sup>. According to Dr. Blair Wylie at Columbia University, “I think a lot of the individual behavior changes that we might prescribe if you will, as physicians, to improve someone’s health are available only to the wealthy<sup>40</sup>.”

And it’s not just a problem for the black community. As black hair care products have become more popular on social media platforms, some non-black customers have begun using them as well<sup>41</sup>. As a result, white women have been coming forward to complain about the harshness of certain products, which has led to black product companies allegedly diluting their toxic products for their new white audience<sup>42</sup>.

According to Raquel Savage, who was invited to be a hair model for the brand “Carol’s Daughter,” hairstylists there spilled about both “Carol’s Daughter” and “Shea Moisture” changing the formula of their products so that they’d be “less heavy” for white customers<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> Todd’s daughter acknowledges afros: <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/james-toddlab/beauty-justice-podcast-0>

<sup>36</sup> Todd’s daughter wants to wear her hair down: <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/james-toddlab/beauty-justice-podcast-0>

<sup>37</sup> Silent Spring Study on chemical products marketed for children: <https://silentspring.org/news/hair-products-black-women-contain-mix-hazardous-ingredients>

<sup>38</sup> Dr. Wylie talks wealth and poverty access: <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/james-toddlab/beauty-justice-podcast-0>

<sup>39</sup> <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/james-toddlab/beauty-justice-podcast-0>

<sup>40</sup> Dr. Wylie: <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/james-toddlab/beauty-justice-podcast-0>

<sup>41</sup> Social media notices a change in customers:

<sup>42</sup> Diluting hair products: <https://www.racked.com/2017/4/5/15189534/whitewashing-natural-hair-care-carolsdaughter-shea-moisture>

Woman says black hair products don’t work after they sell to white companies:

<https://www.247liveculture.com/hair-and-beauty-1/are-you-really-buying-black-a-list-of-non-black-owned-hair-products>

<sup>43</sup> Workers for hair show say the recipe is changing: <https://www.racked.com/2017/4/5/15189534/whitewashing-natural-hair-care-carolsdaughter-shea-moisture>

**Leila Williams**

**Draft #3: Fine draft with source links**

Christal Love is another woman who for years faithfully used chemical straighteners on her hair<sup>44</sup>. Love battled stage three<sup>45</sup> breast cancer, and when her hair fell out after chemotherapy treatments, she thought about the hair products she's used and whether they were really as unsafe as she'd heard in the past. A scientific study from City of Hope<sup>46</sup> came out around this time, and Love had the same reaction as Mitchell did: that's what happened to me<sup>47</sup>. Love threw out the chemicals after that; "I'd rather...not have to worry about another what if again<sup>48</sup>.

In 2021, Dr. Lindsey Treviño at City of Hope in Los Angeles alerted the public about the main ingredients to be wary of in hair care products: parabens, phthalates and fragrances<sup>49</sup>. "You can actually scan the barcodes of the products that you are currently using and find out how hazardous they are for your health," said Treviño<sup>50</sup>. Since then, a webpage called "Bench to Community" has a list of apps for checking the safety of products, articles on chemicals and cancer, and other resources<sup>51</sup>. A project called the "Non-Toxic Black Beauty Project"<sup>52</sup> promoting safer cosmetics can also be found on Bench to Community's website.

There is also—still standing—a "Lawsuit Watch"<sup>53</sup> webpage. The first thing you see on the page is the following statement: "If you or a loved one received a diagnosis of ovarian, endometrial, or uterine cancer after using a chemical hair relaxer, you may be entitled to compensation."<sup>54</sup> The site also features Jenny Mitchell<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>44</sup>Christal Love's Story: <https://www.cbsnews.com/losangeles/news/studyfinds-link-between-black-hair-products-and-breast-cancer/>

<sup>45</sup> Not just any cancer: <https://www.cbsnews.com/losangeles/news/studyfinds-link-between-black-hair-products-and-breast-cancer/>

<sup>46</sup> City of Hope Study: <https://www.cityofhope.org/chemicals-cause-harmful-effects-black-women>

<sup>47</sup> Love's reaction to a scientific study: <https://www.cbsnews.com/losangeles/news/studyfinds-link-between-black-hair-products-and-breast-cancer/>

Mitchell's reaction to a scientific study: <https://www.goodmorningamerica.com/wellness/story/woman-sues-companies-allegingchemical-hair-%20straightening-products-920.07557>

<sup>48</sup> Love throws away the chemicals: <https://www.cbsnews.com/losangeles/news/studyfinds-link-between-black-hair-products-and-breast-cancer/>

<sup>49</sup>Dr. Lindsey Treviño on ingredients to avoid: <https://www.cbsnews.com/losangeles/news/studyfinds-link-between-black-hair-products-and-breast-cancer/>

<sup>50</sup>Dr. Treviño says scan your products: <https://www.cbsnews.com/losangeles/news/studyfinds-link-between-black-hair-products-and-breast-cancer/>

<sup>51</sup>Bench to Community: <https://www.bench2community.org/resources>

<sup>52</sup> Project to safer cosmetics: <https://www.bench2community.org/resources>

<sup>53</sup> File a lawsuit here: [https://advocatealliancegroup.com/lp/index.php?msid=13&oid=1537&gad=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwrpOiBhBVEiwA\\_473dPZrd2s0aivTzySZHty4bg29aTrZ0Dg1v023mplT6c69331q\\_HAY8SxoCCjgQAvD\\_BwE](https://advocatealliancegroup.com/lp/index.php?msid=13&oid=1537&gad=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwrpOiBhBVEiwA_473dPZrd2s0aivTzySZHty4bg29aTrZ0Dg1v023mplT6c69331q_HAY8SxoCCjgQAvD_BwE)

<sup>54</sup> Webpage introduction: [https://advocatealliancegroup.com/lp/index.php?msid=13&oid=1537&gad=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwrpOiBhBVEiwA\\_473dPZrd2s0aivTzySZHty4bg29aTrZ0Dg1v023mplT6c69331q\\_HAY8SxoCCjgQAvD\\_BwE](https://advocatealliancegroup.com/lp/index.php?msid=13&oid=1537&gad=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwrpOiBhBVEiwA_473dPZrd2s0aivTzySZHty4bg29aTrZ0Dg1v023mplT6c69331q_HAY8SxoCCjgQAvD_BwE)

<sup>55</sup> Webpage background information includes Jenny Mitchell:

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**Leila Williams**

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**Leila Williams**

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