

FOR THE ASIAN WOMAN WHO WANTS MORE

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THE CLAIM THAT NEW WHITENING PRODUCTS ARE NOT
DANGEROUS HAS SEEN A HUGE RISE IN SALES.

DOES THAT MEAN SKIN LIGHTENING IS NO LONGER A
SERIOUS ISSUE? ANJANA GOSAI INVESTIGATES...

Lighten up?





Every aspiring British Asian journalist pitches this idea: why are we obsessed with the colour of our skin? The reason Asiana has never run the feature is because the answer is as obvious as it is depressing – the Asian community, by and large, have always favoured those with lighter skin. Up until now, that conclusion was an unarguable one, which made any debate about the issue amount to little more than the dark-skinned having a rant about being treated like second class citizens, with the fair-skinned adding insult to injury by the seemingly patronising claim that they wished they were more tanned...

But with a new generation of 'brown and proud' women and men refusing to succumb to the prejudices of yesteryear, living in a time where the fairest member of the country's most successful girl band, Girls Aloud, is castigated for not bronzing up to match her spray tanned cohorts, do dark-skinned Asians still feel the insecurity of not being fair enough?

If the steadily rising sales of skin lightening products is anything to go by, the answer is very much the same as it's ever been – yes.

'There have been a number of launches of not just skin creams, but soaps and deodorants that contain whitening and bleaching agents,' says Alexandra Richmond, a senior health and beauty analyst with Mintel Research.

Some of the products to hit our shelves include familiar brands such as Fair & Lovely, which is owned by the multinational corporation Unilever, while newcomers such as Lightenex and Light of Day are fast becoming household names due to wide-reaching and cleverly targeted marketing. But whereas once

we were unanimous in our condemnation for bleaching products containing harmful, and in some cases, banned ingredients – many have been swayed by the fact that some of the recent products claim to be completely safe. Which is why we've decided it's time to reopen the skin lightening debate and investigate whether these new 'wonder creams' really pose no threat, especially seeing as many don't know the difference between the new variety and those that contain potentially dangerous chemicals.

Whether you're happy in your skin or desperate to lighten up, it's clear we can no longer afford to stay in the dark over the issue...

A DARK PAST

So what is behind the Asian woman's mad pursuit for having fair skin? Historians believe it stems from age-old prejudices and colonial attitudes. Dr Premen Addy, a senior lecturer in Asian and international history at the University of Oxford, believes: 'This obsession with fairness hails from as far back as the Aryan invasion of the subcontinent. The fair skinned people looked down upon the original inhabitants who were of course, much darker. It led to a correlation being made between colour and caste – the assumption was the fairer you are the higher your caste.' He adds that several generations of British rule only served to enhance the myth that 'fairness is close to godliness'.

'Even today, you only need to look at matrimonials to see proud boasts of being fair skinned or having wheat coloured complexion.'

Some critics believe that Bollywood has a patchy record in setting the right example, and

is much to blame as the Raj.

Omar Qureshi, a leading film journalist in Mumbai believes: 'Bollywood perpetuates a myth that has existed for years – that of white superiority and the subservience of darker skin. It's a problem across India and Bollywood amplifies the issue on a larger stage. It is racism at its most magnified. However the industry is slowly beginning to improve and dusky beauties like Bipasha Basu and Rani Mukherjee are rightly hailed for their stunning looks.'

The industry's damning record in this area was brought home recently when its biggest star, Shah Rukh Khan, was widely criticised for fronting a campaign for skin lightening cream aimed at men.

In a recent interview Bipasha Basu, who has reportedly faced slurs from rival actresses due to her darker skin tone, said: 'It's bizarre this obsession with fair skin. It reflects a lack of intelligence, I think.'

Which raises the question: are women who use these products unintelligent as well as insecure? Or are they simply doing what any woman interested in make-up is doing – beautifying themselves? British Asian model Suchitra comments: 'If a beauty product isn't deemed dangerous, it's no one's business but mine whether I should use it or not. I admit they're not exactly good for your health, but there have been many cases where the misuse of mascara has led to impairment of the vision, but I don't see a campaign to have mascaras banned, do you?'

The argument that women have the right to use any product that helps them feel better about themselves is a valid one, but are they really safe?

CONTROVERSIAL INGREDIENTS

HYDROQUINONE

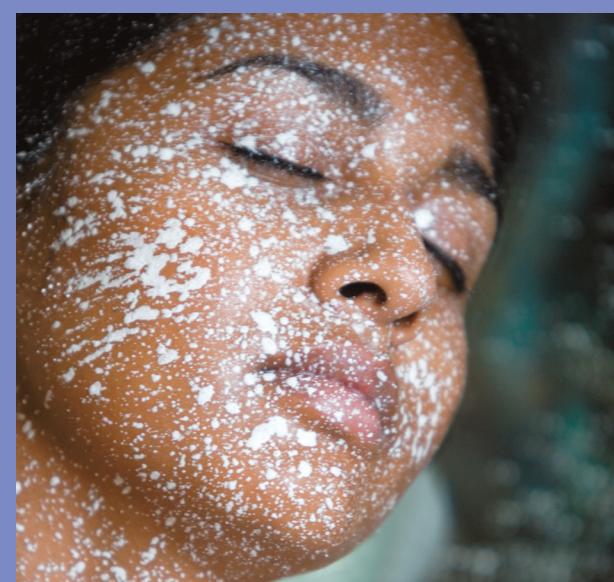
A severely toxic and very powerful chemical, it was banned in 2001 for over the counter cosmetics in the EU. Prolonged use can thicken the collagen fibres damaging the skin's connective tissues. US studies have linked it with leukemia, liver damage, and thyroid disorders.

MERCURY

Banned in 1976, mercury works by slowly accumulating within the skin cells stripping the skin of its natural pigment and leaving behind the tell tale signs of grey/blue pigmentation. In the long term the chemical can damage vital organs and lead to liver or kidney failure and mercury poisoning.

KOJIC ACID

This bleaching agent has been questioned by several leading dermatologists. When Japan carried out tests on animals it caused embryo toxicity. As a result Japan banned the use of the ingredient in skin creams in 2003. Korea and Switzerland soon followed suit.





THE RISKS

By using skin bleaching products, today's Asian woman not only risks the accusation of fuelling old fashioned attitudes – some experts are warning that she could also sustain irreversible damage to her skin, and in severe cases her long term health.

'There is no safe way to lighten your skin and change it from its natural colour,' says Sujata Jolly, a research scientist who specialises in skin dermatology and disorders.

The skin produces melanin on exposure to the sun as a natural defence against harmful UV rays. When a person starts to use bleaching cream, the active ingredients work by inhibiting the production of melanin and the skin initially appears to lighten.

'But as soon as the skin is exposed to the sunlight the reaction between the sun and chemicals trigger an oxidation reaction, which then starts turning the it darker. This makes the person use the bleaching creams more and more, causing deeper damage to the skin and thus they enter into a vicious cycle.'

'As a result of using bleaching creams the melanocytes (melanin producing cells) are gradually destroyed and the skin is left at the mercy of the harmful rays rendering the it defenceless and fragile. This can lead in the short term to skin cancer and kidney and liver damage in the long term,' warns Sujata.

This damage can be caused by a number of products containing active ingredients, some of which are banned in other countries yet are readily available in your local high street.

While technically, products containing harmful ingredients such as hydroquinone and mercury are banned in the UK, they still remain easily purchased 'under the counter' from many ethnic shops in Britain, over the internet, and in other countries.

Certain whitening products even contain steroids, which have dangerous physical side effects such as skin thinning.

And that's not all. A new generation of products that claim to be safer contain

'Whether you're happy in your skin or desperate to lighten up, it's clear we can't stay in the dark over the issue'

ingredients such as kojic acid – which has been banned in Japan, Korea and Switzerland over fears that it can cause cell mutation.

The industry seemingly contains a minefield of problem products. The UK authorities are finally beginning to clamp down on the sale of products infused with banned ingredients.

In July, Greenford shopkeeper Liyakat Tai pleaded guilty to four counts of selling illegal skin lightening creams. He was fined £500 and ordered to pay £863 costs after trading standards officers found 150 harmful skin lightening products in his warehouse.

But while the black market takes a bashing, the mainstream brands continue to sell and say that they are simply giving women what they want.

A statement from Unilever, makers of Fair & Lovely reads: 'Like anti-ageing in Europe and USA, having slightly lighter and clearer looking skin is the predominant beauty need in Asia and parts of Africa. A large proportion of women in Asia aspire to have a skin shade that is lighter than their current complexion.' The company says the safety of Fair & Lovely has been 'proven beyond doubt.'

Pharmaclinix, who produce the bestselling product Lightenex, contains kojic dipalmitate, which is derived from kojic acid, but isn't a bleaching agent, are proud to point to out it contains some great natural skin lightening ingredients such as licorice and vitamin C as well as bearberry, a botanical that contains the active component arbutin, which releases a natural form of hydroquinone. Our independent researchers Sujata Jolly and Victoria Smith (whose full investigation appears in the Brand Analysis section on this page) concluded: 'No side effects have been shown in clinical studies. But, it also contains isopropyl myristate, which can clog pores resulting in blackheads and breakouts.'

Pharmaclinix promises: 'All our products undergo rigorous clinical trials by independent laboratories and are evaluated as safe and effective. It needs to be stressed that kojic dipalmitate is not a bleaching agent. It is an ester and a stable form, which can be used in a formulation for regular use.'

THE BIG LIGHTENING DEBATE

Is it wrong for Asian women to use skin lighteners?

Two beauty-conscious Asiana readers share their views...



YES

Sabah Khan, 21

Perhaps two or three decades ago, I can see why British Asian women wanted lighter skin – our elders preferred it, the British were less threatened by it. But it's 2009 now – the public perception of dark skin is an exotic and enviable one, but even if this weren't the case, Asian women are surely strong and proud enough not to give a damn.

The thing our elders never realised that dark or fair, we are all considered brown in the eyes of others, and being fair-skinned doesn't make anyone a better person! They say these wonder creams are a matter of personal choice, but as long as they are freely available, young, impressionable girls will turn to them in the misguided belief that it will make them happy. I say we ban these products and remind women we're beautiful as we are.



NO

Krishna Bharakda, 23

They say a woman ingests up to six pounds of lipstick in her lifetime, and seeing as many of them contain lead, I can't remember the last time a woman died from it, do you? Fact is, most cosmetics contain chemical preservatives that can cause cancer, but we still use them anyway. Why? Because we want to.

Most Asian girls bleach every scrap of dark hair from our top lip all the way down to our backs, and think nothing of pouring hot wax on our private parts and legs to look and feel smoother.

If you don't, good for you – don't judge people who do. If you do, and still think that gives you the right to condemn skin lightening creams, you're a hypocrite. If another woman wants to use a product that isn't banned and knows the risks involved, it really is no one's business but hers...



A BRIGHT FUTURE?

Whilst many such products are purchased by those who have absolutely nothing wrong with their skin, if you are one of the women out there with genuine skin care concerns such as hyperpigmentation or the mask of pregnancy, there are a number of natural alternatives.

'The legal and regulated brands are tapping into growing consumer demand for natural ingredients, and are using plant-based ingredients known for their whitening benefits. Licorice and mulberry root and bearberry extracts are regarded as effective skin whitening ingredients,' says Mintel's Alexandra Richmond.

A leading consultant dermatologist Sandeep Cliff stresses that women who suffer from real skincare problems should see a professional before taking action. He advises: 'A dermatologist will ensure that the cause of the problem can be correctly identified and the most appropriate treatment, if available, be offered.'

'I see women who have used bleaching agents on their skin that contain high potency steroids, which can be damaging to the complexion in so many ways. These products can trigger skin thinning, bruising and stretch marks, yet they are readily available. The problem with these products is that they are clearly misleading and making false claims without emphasising the potential problems.'

But for organisations that promote the empowerment and independence of Asian woman, the fact that so many whitening creams exist in the grey area between safe and harmful is just the start of the problem. It is our attitudes, they say, that needs to change, if we are to become truly comfortable in our skin.

'The rise in skin lighteners shows how the world has given women these artificial needs and desires. The health hazards of many whiteners have hardly been examined or addressed but this condemnable racist projection of fairness as the ultimate "ideal of beauty" has resulted in a grave distortion of aspirations,' says Sudha Sundararaman, General Secretary, of the All India Democratic Women's Association, an organisation that campaigns for women's rights and for their education, employment and status.

If after reading all of this, you are still adamant on using these products to lighten your skin, you should make a conscious effort to educate yourself about the ingredients. A simple internet search will often tell you what you are looking for.

The one absolute fact to remember is that once the damage has been done, there's no going back. But we're not here to judge. If women want to purchase a beauty product and, clearly, many of you do – our job as a beauty magazine is to recommend the best and the safest, and remind you that we exist to promote the belief that brown equals proud. If you must, make sure you use these creams because you want to, not because you feel you have to. Because if you put yourself at risk just to fit in with society, there's little hope of that society ever changing.. ■



BRAND ANALYSIS

We asked skin specialist Sujata Jolly and Victoria Smith from the International Dermal Institute to look at the most popular skin lightening brands in the UK and analyse their ingredients

FAIR AND LOVELY

Sujata says: 'This will treat hyperpigmentation, but is not a skin bleaching agent.'

Victoria says: 'It focuses on the use of vitamins. Vitamin C is known for its skin brightening benefits and vitamin A will encourage cell turnover thus sloughing off pigmented cells quicker.'

They say: 'The safety of Unilever's skin lightening formulations have been proven beyond doubt, based on not only the use of internationally approved cosmetic ingredients but also, the outcome of all human studies as well as mass usage for over 30 years by millions of consumers across the world.'

JOLEN

Sujata says: 'This contains hydrogen peroxide, which causes a chemical reaction to remove colour from the hair. The reaction causes melanin in the hair shaft to oxidise so that it becomes almost colourless. This process does not affect the skin.'

Victoria says: 'If left on the skin for around ten minutes it should be fine but more sensitive skins may experience redness and irritation.'

They say: 'Jolen has been used safely and extensively by women all over the world for over 40 years. However, we always recommend that new users do a patch test, and the instructions for this are in the leaflet which come with the product.'

NUR76*

Sujata says: 'Contains kojic acid, which works by causing a physiological change in the skin in order to make it lighter – the safety of this is disputed.'

Victoria says: 'It also contains natural lighteners such as bearberry extract, licorice and vitamin C.'

They say: 'We do extensive 'in vitro' toxicology testing of all Nur76 products to ensure that it does not cause irritation or adverse effects. We do not do animal testing for any of our products.'

* At the time of going to press a spokeswoman for NUR76 said that the company has removed kojic acid from all their products due to concerns over 'skin peeling'.

LIGHT OF DAY

Sujata says: 'Again, kojic acid. Animal studies carried out by Japanese scientists showed that the ingredient can cause embryo toxicity and can also adversely affect the liver and kidneys.'

Victoria says: 'Kojic acid has had problems in terms of stability and potential negative effects on the skin and is therefore rarely used today. Some controversial research has suggested that it may have carcinogenic properties in large doses.'

They say: Asian Health & Beauty, the makers of Light of Day, were unavailable for comment.