



The obsession of south Asian cultures with skin whitening

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Abstract

South-Asian cultures have long been associated with the skin whitening fad. People belonging to different age groups are likely to use skin lightening creams in order to cater to their body image issues. Despite increased awareness about the side effects associated with the creams, people are still following the trend to make their skin tone lighter a few shades. This article concisely discusses about the factors contributing towards the obsession, the usage of fairness creams and the common harmful skin lightening ingredients that guarantee skin lightening but come with a cost.

Keywords: Skin lightening, fairness creams, melanin, melanocytes, formula creams

Introduction

Skin whitening has been regarded as the most desirable thing in the South-Asian countries, where people with darker skin tone have been regarded as less attractive and not meeting the societal standards. The primary reason behind this trend can be attributed to the colonial history of these countries.

People belonging to these countries, consider lighter skin tone to be linked with beauty, and higher socioeconomic background. Owing to this, people tend to use formula creams and packs loaded with chemicals that promise to deliver results within few days of usage. Most importantly, these creams contain chemicals such as Lead and Mercury that might prove to be extremely harmful for the skin and the body if used in the long-run.

The availability of these creams over-the-counter is another reason behind the increased usage of these creams despite their side effects. Despite the increased awareness of the consequences amongst the masses, the increased usage suggests that the trend is still on the rise.

In addition to this, the obsession with skin whitening has also resulted in body image issues. The preference for 'white' skin is not only common in women, but men can also be seen applying specialized fairness creams for enhancing their skin tone. The creams in the market are also given a catchy name in order to convince the audience that the cream they are going to apply will make them approximately five shades lighter. Therefore, it has become important to evaluate the complications that might arise with increased usage of the specialized creams and how it might impact the mindset of the people in the upcoming years.

This discussion article aims to provide a better understanding of the skin whitening obsession in the South-Asian countries.

Melanin and the color of the skin

The outermost layer of the skin, known as the epidermis contain melanocytes that produce melanin. The synthesis of melanin occurs in the melanosomes that occur as specialized organelles inside the melanocytes. The process associated with the production of melanin is known as melanogenesis,

which results in the formation of two types of melanin, that is, Eumelanin and pheomelanin.

Skin colour of an individual is determined by the dispersion of the melanosomes as well as their quantity in the skin. When there is excessive generation of melanin in the skin, it can result in skin disorders such as melasma, or post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation. Pharmacological agents such as hydroquinone, and corticosteroids help in lightening the skin tone primarily by interfering in the process of melanogenesis or by preventing the process of maturation of melanocytes.

The colour of the skin and latitude are also correlated. People who live closer to the equator tend to have dark skin for protection against UV radiation, since overexposure might lead to skin cancer. On the other hand, people who live at higher altitudes tend to have lighter skin tone, for maintenance of the vitamin D photosynthesis, a process that is UV dependent.

Fairness as an Object of Desire

The last fifty years have witnessed a tremendous increase in the usage of fairness creams, and 40% of the total profits associated with the cosmetic industry comes from the selling of fairness creams. Being fair is represented as the ladder to a better career in the advertisements, and their regular and consistent usage is assumed to inhibit the production of melanin, and thus make the person appear to be fair. Usually, the common theme used by the advertisers is showing a young girl who is dark skinned being bullied or is unable to study, get a job and get married. As soon as somebody suggests her the fairness cream, she starts using it, and soon after that she gets a job and her favourite boy approaches her since she has become more beautiful now. Clearly, the manufacturers of these fairness creams have exploited the existing trend of achieving fair skin and thus, promoted their product as the way to achieve it. Not only this, there are numerous beauty pageants carried out in the South-Asian countries that again depict that if the winner has fair skin, he or she is more likely to win the show. In fact the actors and the actresses in the film industry are more likely to get selected for a movie, if they are fair skinned, thus, contributing more towards the existing obsession.

It has also been seen that the usage of these fairness creams started when the users are of teenage years, when they are more likely to suffer from body image issues and tend to be depressed when they are not desirable enough to the opposite gender. Also, during this time period, they are not much aware of the side effects linked with the consistent usage and might give up the usage of these as they become aware of the long term repercussions.

In addition to this, there are various skin lightening treatments available at the salons or the clinics, where there are specialized facials and treatments especially for the treatment of dark skin. Now, it might seem that there is nothing wrong in getting treatment for skin issues under the supervision of a dermatologist, however, repeated procedures might be a cause of damage in the long run.

The Use of Skin Lightening Agents

The most common skin lightening agent in the market these days is hydroquinone. Although there are other agents also, that are comparatively safe, but the efficacy and the rapid action of hydroquinone has allowed it to garner significant attention. It is suggested to use the ingredient only under the supervision of a dermatologist, however, in countries like India, the ingredient can be bought easily over the counter. People are unaware that if they use the product for long term, they will be damaging their skin and make it more sensitive to UV radiation.

The derivative of hydroquinone, arbutin, is another skin lightening agent that is considered to be safe and effective. The use of antioxidants, such as vitamin C and vitamin E, and retinoid are also used for making the skin bright. However, it is noteworthy that the latter can only make the skin bright, but ingredients such as hydroquinone will inhibit the activity of enzymes responsible for the production of melanin, and will ultimately bleach the skin.

Implications associated with Long term Usage

With the consistent and long-term usage of skin lightening agents, various side effects emerge such as acne, pruritus, as well as a sensation of burning at the site of application due to the disruption of skin barrier. The usage of active and potent ingredients like hydroquinone, or corticosteroids result in dermatitis, squamous cell carcinoma, adrenal insufficiency. Though there are regulations pertaining to the use of these agents, however, products do not disclose the percentage of the ingredient present in the product and often exceed the legal limit.

Conclusion

Although the obsession with skin whitening is still increasing, due to advertising or the constant pressure of the society to fit into the ideal image, the need of the hour is awareness. People need to be educated about the side effects associated with usage of skin lightening cream, and though they might appear to be fair for a while, the consequences are often incurable. Hence, it is suggested to use any ingredient on the skin only under dermatological guidance.

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