

REPORT ON 'TOXIC' TALC WORRIES INDIA

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The debate over whether talcum powder poses serious health risks is in the spotlight again.

A risk assessment draft on talc published by Health Canada, the country's public health department, states that talcum powder is harmful to the lungs when inhaled during breathing and could possibly cause ovarian cancer when used by women in the genital area. The draft, which was opened for public comments on Saturday, would be confirmed in a final assessment that would entail Canada adding talc to a list of toxic substances if the proposed conclusions are confirmed at the end of a 60-day feedback period.

At that point in time the Canadian government would also decide on the measures it would take to prohibit or restrict the use of the clay mineral, which finds wide use including in cosmetics, paints, ceramics.

Indian market

In India, talcum powder is among the most widely known talc-based self-care products. From fighting perspiration and odour, to helping lend the user a 'fairer' skin tone, a large number of Indian consumers rely on talcum powder and the market is estimated to be worth about Rs. 700 crore.

"Breathing in products containing talc can lead to coughing, difficulty in breathing, decreased lung function, scarring of the lung tissue," Health Canada states in the draft assessment. "These effects may get worse over time. Using products containing talc in the genital area may cause ovarian cancer", the health authority says. It adds that contact with the skin (excluding the female genital area) and mouth is, however, not a health concern.

The draft cites research on talc by organisations including the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), the Danish Environmental Protection Agency and the World Health Organization (WHO).

Observing that the health concerns surrounding the use of talcum powder were not new, Bela Verma, president of the Mumbai chapter of the Indian Academy of Paediatrics said: "Yet, its usage and popularity has never gone down. Most Indians use talcum powder to get rid of sweat and the odour that it generates. But talcum powder clogs the pores, which are supposed to remain open. This is the main cause of local infections like folliculitis, boils, skin eruptions."

Specifically, in children, allergies due to inhalation of the particles was very common, Dr. Verma said, adding that she warns against the use of talcum powder, even those that are specially made for babies. "Newborn babies don't need powders. They don't even need daily soap baths. Just warm water works fine for their hygiene. Very rarely, I advise parents to use glycerine soaps which are mild."

Dermatologist Snehal Sriram echoed the views.

"Most over the counter powders are talc-based. Some powders contain starch which is slightly better as the particles are not as fine as talc. However, I don't recommend their use for children or adults either," said Dr. Sriram.

The American Academy of Pediatrics too warns against the use of baby powder due to the risk of serious respiratory problems.

According to Sneha Limaye of Pune's Chest Research Foundation, the fine particles of talcum powder posed the same health risks as particulate matter (PM) in polluted air as they could get lodged deep in the lungs.

The risk of ovarian cancer has also been a big concern.

J&J case

In July, a U.S. court ordered pharmaceutical giant Johnson & Johnson to pay \$4.7 billion to 22 women who claimed that they had suffered from cancer as a result of using J&J's talcum powder. The company is contesting that verdict.

Canada's draft states that the IARC has classified perineal use of talc-based body powder as "possibly carcinogenic to humans" on the basis of limited evidence in humans. It further cites a study that revealed the presence of talc particles in ovaries of humans and associated perineal exposure to talc with presence of talc in lymph nodes and ovaries of women diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

Gynaecologist Suchitra Pandit said there was not enough evidence to conclusively link the use of talcum powder to ovarian cancer. "Use of talcum powder in the perineum region has been said to be a known cause and we advise against it. However, much larger studies are needed to prove the link", said Dr. Pandit.

J&J said it plans to respond to Health Canada as the draft is now open for public comments.

"The draft by Health Canada appears to rely on a select review of the evidence and does not appear to include the largest, most recent studies on the use of cosmetic talc," a J&J spokesperson told *The Hindu*. "Health Canada also relies on a handful of conclusions by third parties, which also were not based on a review of the wider body of evidence. The weight of the evidence does not support this draft conclusion."

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