Does Talcum Powder Cause Ovarian Cancer?

Millions of women grew up using talcum powder or “baby powder” after a shower or when diapering their babies. For them, the news that this popular product could cause cancer is shocking. Here’s what you need to know.

A growing body of evidence suggests that using talc in the genital area can increase a woman’s chances of developing ovarian cancer. And the more years she used talc, the more likely she is to develop ovarian cancer.

Fortunately, “significant” increase in the chances of developing ovarian cancer is not a large increase for any one individual woman. One in every 75 women will develop ovarian cancer in her lifetime — just over 1%.

Based on dozens of research studies on thousands of women, women who use talcum powder are about 30% more likely to be diagnosed with ovarian cancer than women who did not use talcum powder. This means that over her lifetime, a woman who uses talcum powder increases her individual chances of developing ovarian cancer from 1.3% to 1.7%. This is a low risk for each woman, but a big overall increase in the U.S. For example, if one million women used the powder, 4,000 more of them will develop ovarian cancer than otherwise would have if they hadn’t used talcum powder.

In 2017, there were over 20,000 new cases of ovarian cancer in the U.S. and over 14,000 deaths. When ovarian cancer is found early, a woman has nearly a 93% chance of surviving at least 5 years after she is diagnosed. Those chances drop off to about 30% if the cancer is found after it has spread to other parts of her body.

How Good Is the Evidence?

Most of the evidence comes from a type of study known as the case-control study. For these studies, researchers compare two groups of women—women with ovarian cancer (“cases”) and women without ovarian cancer (“controls”). All the women in the study are asked to recall whether they used talcum powder in the past, and if so, how often and how it was used. Of course, there is no guarantee that the women’s memories are 100% accurate. However, using talcum powder is a somewhat memorable experience, and many women are very sure of whether they did or not.

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) is a well-respected agency within the World Health Organization (WHO). IARC concluded that there was an “unusually consistent” increased chance of developing ovarian cancer in studies of women who reported using talcum powder in the genital area.

The Cancer Prevention and Treatment Fund helps adults and children reduce their risk of getting cancer and helps everyone get the best possible treatment.

Cancer Helpline: info@stopcancerfund.org

Websites: www.center4research.org www.stopcancerfund.org

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We’re in the Headlines!

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Jackson Troubles Shine Light on a Fact of
Washington Life: Sleeping Pills
Politico, April 25, 2018
FDA Worried Drug Was Risky: Now
Reports of Death Spark Concern
CNN, April 9, 2018
U.S. FDA Puts Restrictions on Essure
Birth Control Implant but No Recall
The Associated Press, April 9, 2018
Patient Advocacy Groups Take in Millions from
Drugmakers. Is There a Payback?
Kaiser Health News, April 6, 2018
Big Pharma Greets Hundreds of Ex-Federal
Workers at the “Revolving Door”
Washington Post, January 25, 2018

Ronny Jackson, the White House physician
nominated to be the Secretary of Veterans
Affairs, regularly handed out sleeping pills
and potentially addictive “alertness” drugs to
officials traveling on oversea flights. NCHR
president Dr. Diana Zuckerman told
Politico
that if a doctor hands out pills to people who
aren’t officially their patients, that person
“should not be considered acceptable for a
high-level position in the federal government
—and certainly not for the VA, where the
quality of health care is an essential
responsibility.” Dr. Jackson withdrew his
nomination the next day.

The FDA announced that they would require
that Essure patients receive a patient booklet
with risk information. NCHR’s president told
the Associated Press that the 22-page
booklet is too long and technical and "will be
confusing to many consumers."

After the Parkland shooting, President
Trump held a meeting with video game
executives and experts to discuss the
connection between violent video games and
violent behavior. NCHR’s president
told WJLA that independent research shows
a correlation between aggressive behavior
and exposure to violent video games, but that
"the most harm is done when kids have
access to weapons."

Many cabinet secretaries and key players in
the Trump Administration have made a job
hop from industry. The revolving door goes
both ways — from Congress to industry to
federal agencies and back. NCHR’s president
explained how effective this is for Pharma in
the Washington Post.

NCHR told MedPage Today that the FDA
should not use of the term "abuse deterrent"
to describe highly addictive opioids. We
urged that the drugs be relabeled "crush-
resistant" if that’s the more accurate
adjective. If the FDA fails to do that, we
urged the FDA to require physicians to be
educated about the highly addictive potential
of abuse-deterrent drugs.

Ronn Jackson told MedPage Today that patient lobbying is a relatively
recent development. Now it’s big business.
KHN created a new database that shows
how pharmaceutical companies gave at least
$116 million to patient advocacy groups in 2015
alone, and these groups are lobbying.

The FDA approved the "breakthrough
therapy" drug Nuplazid in 2016 for
Parkinson’s disease patients with
hallucinations. NCHR had testified against
approval. Less than two years later, there have
been hundreds of deaths reported as well as
complaints that the drug doesn’t work.
NCHR’s president told CNN that so many
reported deaths are “almost unheard of, so
you have to take it seriously.” NCHR senior
fellow, Dr. Stephanie Fox-Rawlings, added, “If
we don’t even know that it does work,” how
much risk is acceptable?

The FDA and Opioids: Too Much
Regulation or Not Enough?
MedPage Today, January 31, 2018

We can’t be bought.
Our Center doesn’t accept funding from
drug companies or device manufacturers,
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online at stopcancerfund.org.
Is Sex Discrimination in the Workplace a Health Issue?

When Lynn Povich was one of 46 women suing Newsweek for sex discrimination in 1970, it was almost impossible for women to be hired as reporters, no matter how well-educated and qualified they were. Their success was followed by a tsunami of other successful sex discrimination lawsuits at magazines, newspapers, and TV news stations across the country.

These lawsuits have clearly improved career and economic opportunity for women. Before 1973, “Help Wanted” job listings were separate for women and men, with most of the “women’s jobs” in fields like teaching, secretarial work, retail, and social work. In 1973, this became illegal.

Sex discrimination still exists in the workplace, but tends to be less blatant than it used to be. In addition to the economic ramifications, researchers are beginning to focus on the impact of discrimination on health.

Gender and Discrimination

What used to be called sex discrimination is now called gender discrimination, recognizing that identifying as a man or woman is not the same as being born biologically male or female.

Historically, society has linked certain behavior, culture, and personality traits to either being a man (men play sports; they are strong) or a woman (women cry; they are nurturing). These traditional gender norms and concepts are more fluid than they used to be, but are still influential.

In the United States and many other countries, men have had more power than women. In the workplace, this means more leadership and high-status positions, a more influential voice, and more pay. This power difference has made women feel less respected and underappreciated, which has affected their mental health.

What does this look like in the workplace? Women may have their ideas ignored, may be passed over for opportunities, or harassed by a boss or co-worker. In a 2017 Pew Research Center study, 42% of women reported that they had experienced discrimination at work because of their gender compared with 22% of men. A 2017 ABC News/Washington Post survey found that 54% of women reported receiving unwanted sexual advances from men.

Effects of Discrimination on Mental Health

It is well-known that when individuals are treated differently, unfairly, or badly over a long period of time, it can have negative mental health consequences, including low self-esteem and a higher risk for stress-related disorders such as anxiety and depression. When women face discrimination in their work environments, they can be more susceptible to these mental health issues compared to men.

One 2017 study found that gender discrimination had a big impact on women’s internalized reaction to stress, such as feeling anxious and withdrawing from social relationships. A recent review of many studies looked at how work-related stress contributes to mental health issues. Feeling less valued and respected in the workplace was a major contributor to anxiety and depression.

Bottom Line

Gender discrimination is a mental health and social justice issue. Researchers at Columbia University found that wage inequity can contribute to women’s higher rates of depression and anxiety. Of course, sexual harassment causes enormous stress. Experts point out that depression, stress, and anxiety can affect physical health as well. When a person feels stress, his or her body makes stress hormones that can increase blood pressure and heart rate. Exposure to stress over a long period of time can contribute to numerous physical and mental health problems, including physical aches and pains.

NCHR Foremother Lynn Povich at a Newsweek story conference with all men.
We are so glad to honor our 2018 Health Policy Heroes for their effective efforts to improve policies that affect gun violence. Susan Rioux and Kai Koerber will be representing the activist teachers and students from Parkland, Florida, at our annual Awards luncheon in May 2018.

Susan Rioux is a teacher and Peer Counselor Coordinator at Westglades Middle School, located next to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. Parents have thanked her for having taught their children the skills needed to improve their chances of survival, which were urgently needed when the shooter opened fire on students at the high school on February 14.

Ms. Rioux has been with Broward County’s Peer Counseling program since 1992, usually teaching between 180-200 students each year.

Susan Rioux in Her Own Words:

“No parent should fear that their child will not come home from school due to something like the tragedy that happened at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. This generation of student leaders and activists have challenged our leaders to change policy, or they will do it themselves.

“We are not defined by what happens to us, but how we respond. I am fortunate to teach in a school system and neighborhood in Parkland, Florida, that provides excellent resources and support to our students. After the MSD shooting, most students have seen licensed therapists who specialize in dealing with trauma. For many of the children, becoming an activist to prevent this from happening again is very empowering. Fortunately, the parents and community members are extremely caring and supportive.

“Most people do not realize that the MSD tragedy has affected far more than the student population of Douglas High. In addition to the 3,000 high school students who were affected, there are almost 2,000 faculty, staff and students at Westglades Middle School, where they were also locked down, hearing shots, and wondering about the welfare of loved ones and former students.”

We are so glad to honor our 2018 Health Policy Heroes for their effective efforts to improve policies that affect gun violence. Susan Rioux and Kai Koerber will be representing the activist teachers and students from Parkland, Florida, at our annual Awards luncheon in May 2018.

Kai Koerber did not attend middle school in Parkland, so he did not benefit from the training provided by Susan Rioux. As a student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas H.S., Kai is a survivor of the tragic February 14 shooting and has become a prominent activist for gun control and mental health legislation.

Kai was part of the group of 100 students who met with legislators in Tallahassee to discuss legislation to reduce gun violence. The students watched as an assault rifle ban and other bills were defeated on February 20, but they didn’t give up. As pressure to “do something” increased, on March 9, the Florida legislature passed the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act, which raised the minimum age for a firearm purchase to 21, instituted a 3-day waiting period, banned bump stocks, and made other policy changes.

Kai has appeared on numerous TV shows on the topic, including The View, The Daily Show, NBC 6 Impact, NBC 6 Voices, CNN Wolf Blitzer, CNN Don Lemon, and CNN New Day. He has been interviewed for CNN.com and Teen Vogue and was featured by the Miami Herald as a leading activist embodying the spirit of Martin Luther King Jr. He is one of the organizers of the March For Our Lives campaign.

Kai was a featured guest at the King Center in Atlanta, for an event commemorating the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

A 4.0 student at MSD, Kai was recently an invited guest of the Washington Education Association, speaking to more than 1,000 teachers on the topics of mental health in schools and supporting student advocacy. During that trip, he also supported the local student rally in Spokane and addressed hundreds of students about gun control and violence in support of National Walkout Day.

Kai has dedicated himself to pushing forward an agenda for a Public Safety Tax and a mental health curriculum for grades K-12. While working to form two non-profits on these issues, he is still keeping his focus on pursuing a college education, planning to study Aerospace Engineering.

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The African American study compared 584 African American women in 11 different geographic regions in the U.S. who had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer to 745 women of the same age and geographic location who had not developed ovarian cancer. About 63% of women with ovarian cancer said they had used talc and 53% of the healthy women said they had used it. The study found that the women who used talc anywhere in their body were more likely to have been diagnosed with epithelial ovarian cancer. Instead of a 1.3% lifetime risk, the women who used talc had almost a 2% lifetime risk of developing ovarian cancer.

Similarly, the New England ovarian cancer study was conducted by researchers from the prestigious Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston, supported by a grant from the National Institutes of Health. They compared more than 2,000 women living in Massachusetts and New Hampshire who had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer, with more than 1,500 women of the same age and geographic location who did not have cancer. The study found that the women who used talc anywhere in their body were more likely to have been diagnosed with epithelial ovarian cancer. Instead of a 1.3% lifetime risk, the women who used talc had almost a 2% lifetime risk of developing ovarian cancer.

Like the African American study, the New England study found that the women who used talc in the genital area, whether or not they used it elsewhere in their body, were significantly more likely to have been diagnosed with epithelial ovarian cancer. Most reported using Johnson & Johnson Baby Powder or Shower to Shower powder.

Many body powders are now made with cornstarch instead of talc. Women who used those same brand name powders made with cornstarch were not considered talc users in these studies, and there are no known risks for powders made with cornstarch instead of talc. However, talc-based powders remain on the market, promoted by Johnson & Johnson as "iconic" and "safe". In contrast, other companies that sell talcum powder have issued safety warnings on their products.

What Have the Courts Decided?

Since 2014, Johnson & Johnson has defended its talcum powder in several law suits. In 2016, the courts ruled in favor of the family of a woman who died of ovarian cancer at the age of 62. Particles of talc were found in her ovaries, which she had removed after her cancer diagnosis. However, the courts overturned the ruling just a few months later due to jurisdictional issues, not safety issues. A woman in California who won a $70 million dollar against the company continues to fight for fair warning labels on the powder.

In a related lawsuit, a New Jersey court ruled in favor of a man who claimed the powder had caused an asbestos-related lung cancer known as mesothelioma. In that case, the talcum powder was likely contaminated with asbestos, a chemical that is known to cause cancer in humans.

Bottom Line

While the scientific evidence has shown a consistent link between talcum powder and ovarian cancer, many questions remain. The most important question for you is: Why take the risk?
Opioids and College Students

Caroline Halsted, Spring 2018 Intern, National Center for Health Research

Despite media attention and efforts to reduce opioid addiction, overdoses and deaths are still occurring at an alarming rate. Between July 2016 and September 2017, opioid overdoses increased by 30% across the United States and 70% in the Midwest. The impact on 18-25 year olds is particularly dramatic. The graph on the right shows that 18-25 year olds are much less likely to be prescribed opioids compared to other adults, but misuse painkillers at the highest rate.

Misuse is defined as taking a prescription in a way other than it was prescribed, taking someone else’s prescription, or taking a prescription with the goal of getting high. Most people who use prescription opioids for non-medical reasons initially get the medication from a friend or family member for free. However, 80% of heroin users started by misusing a prescription opioid. This raises the question: Where do these free opioid samples come from, and how can access to opioids be curtailed?

Adolescents and young adults are commonly prescribed opioids after procedures such as wisdom teeth removal and surgeries following sports injuries. Since side effects from these prescriptions are common and more pills are prescribed than needed, patients who do not take the full prescription often don’t know what to do with the extra pills. It can be easier to keep the pills around or give them to a friend than it is to dispose of them properly. Young adults tend to take more risks than older adults and are sometimes unaware of how easy it can be to become addicted to opioids.

Personal Stories

Research indicated that about 100 million opioid pills prescribed for wisdom tooth removals and about half of them are not used by that patient. To learn more about this issue, I interviewed 16 young adults aged 19-23 who have used opioids for medical reasons in the last two years, almost all of whom were left with excess pills.

Here are a few responses:

- A young man said: “I could totally feel myself becoming dependent and wanting to take more of the medication. However, I pushed myself to wean myself off the medication and was fine thereafter.”
- A college woman had a similar experience with opioids: “By the end of things, I could recognize that I wanted to take the pill because I could, not because I needed it for pain. I was afraid of feeling pain and I was maybe a little too proactive with taking my pills.”

Most of the young adults I interviewed did not have positive experiences with the pills. Many felt nauseous, uncomfortable, and complained that the pills were not effective in helping their pain. One 20-year-old decided to take ibuprofen instead of the pills she was prescribed, saying, “It worked better, didn’t put me in a fog, and got rid of the inflammation in my face.”

What Happens to Leftover Pills?

Even though most of these young adults had bad experiences with opioids after their procedures, almost all of them either kept the pills around or gave them to a friend or family member. Unused opioids sitting in medicine cabinets can be extremely dangerous and could lead to a highly addictive pill falling into the hands of someone who could misuse the drug.

Though not a scientific study, these interviews suggest that at least for some young adults, too many doses are being prescribed for wisdom teeth and other procedures, and the leftover pills are being misused.

What you can do:

- The next time you or your child is prescribed opioids, ask the doctor if acetaminophen or ibuprofen might work instead.
- Try to avoid filling the prescription until you know that you need it. Filling the prescription could mean that you end up with excess pills, which someone could easily misuse.
- Check your medicine cabinet for opioids and other potentially dangerous pills.
- Dispose of opioids properly. Pharmacies often have pill drops where you can dispose of your extra prescriptions. The FDA has tips for disposing of prescription drugs at home (www.fda.gov).
We’re proud to announce the Janice Bilden Cancer Prevention Internship, thanks to a generous donation from her daughter Holly Bilden-Stehling.

Holly tells us that her Mom “loved to laugh, have fun, and help her family in any way she could. Mom worked hard all her life starting when she was very young with paper routes, babysitting, and even setting pins at the bowling alley. Mom grew up in a 3-room house with 6 siblings, never even having indoor plumbing until she was married. She never complained. Instead she freely gave of herself to her family, friends and church. She was my best friend and my Matron of Honor.

“Cancer took a devastating toll on her family. She lost 2 sisters and 2 brothers to cancer — all different types of cancers, but all with the same outcome. Mom also died from cancer — NK/T-cell lymphoma, nasal type. That type of cancer is very rare — only 1% of the people affected are Caucasian, the median age is 40 – 50, and most are male. My Mom was Caucasian, 76, and obviously female. Cancer doesn’t care about statistics.

“I am glad to have the opportunity to have an internship named in honor of my Mom that will help train a young professional to help others to prevent cancer. I believe wholeheartedly that prevention is the only sure way to save lives and prevent the type of pain my Mom felt, and in losing her the type of pain we feel everyday.”

For more information, contact us at info@center4research.org.

Janice Bilden

Is there someone you would like to honor? Internships and fellowships provide training that can result in a lifetime of good work. Honor a loved one through a donation of cash or stock, a distribution from a retirement plan or life insurance policy, or a will.

Janice Bilden as the baby of the family with her brothers and sisters, 5 of whom died of cancer
Learn about Kai Koerber, the #NeverAgain movement, and how Parkland, FL, students are helping to prevent gun violence.