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Use of skin lightening products among female garment factory employees in Sri Lanka: attitudes, practices and adverse effects

Niranjana Ariyasinghe

General Hospital, Sri Lanka

Use of skin lightening creams is rampant across the globe among people of colored skin despite the serious complications that they cause. However, prevalence data from South Asia is scarce. The aim of the study was to describe the use of whitening cosmetics, including prevalence, factors influencing use and cutaneous adverse effects among female garment factory employees in Sri Lanka. Cross sectional descriptive study comprised of self-completed survey followed by examination of 500 randomly selected garment factory female employees. 452 of the 500 fulfilled inclusion criteria. Fewer than 50% admitted to the use of whitening products. However by indirect questioning using a list of products it was evident that the use was seen in almost 80%. Perceived benefits of having a lighter skin tone were higher among users. ($P=0.05$) Most whitening cream users believed that television influence females to desire a fairer skin tone. ($P=0.05$) Being aware of the harmful effect did not seem to afford any protection from use. Over 80% were unaware of the active ingredients of the product they used although majority considered it important criteria for selection of a product. Acne, red face syndrome, dermatitis and hypertrichosis were significantly higher in uses of illegal cosmetic preparations compared to registered products. ($p=0.05$). Use of skin lightening creams is high among this community. Certain attitudes towards fair skin are more prevalent among users of whitening products. Peer influence and media appears to play a major part in product selection. Persons who use unregulated whitening products experienced more cutaneous complications.

skinmdk@gmail.com