



Frequently Asked Questions on the Link between Talc and Ovarian Cancer

1. What is Talc?

Talc is a naturally occurring mineral, mined from the earth, composed of magnesium, silicon, oxygen, and hydrogen. Chemically, talc is a hydrous magnesium silicate with a chemical formula, $Mg_3Si_4O_{10}(OH)_2$.

It is a powder ranging in color from white through various shades of gray and green to red and brown of impure specimens, translucent to opaque, and having a greasy, soapy feel. It absorbs moisture well and helps cut down on friction, making it useful for keeping skin dry and helping to prevent rashes. It is also known as Talcum powder.

2. What are the Uses of Talc?

Talc has many uses in cosmetics and other personal care products; in food, such as rice and chewing gum; and in the manufacture of tablets. For example, it may be used to absorb moisture, to prevent caking, to make facial makeup opaque, or to improve the feel of a product.

3. When does Talc-Containing Powder become Harmful?

The medicinal benefits of talc containing powders can become harmful when it is contaminated with Asbestos.

Asbestos is also a naturally occurring silicate mineral, but with a different crystalline structure. Both talc and asbestos are naturally occurring minerals that may be found in close proximity in the earth. Unlike talc, however, asbestos is a known carcinogen.

A **carcinogen** is any substance capable of causing cancer in living tissue.

Before the 1970s, talcum powder was often contaminated with asbestos fibres, but since then, all home products containing talcum powder are legally obliged to be asbestos-free.

4. What is the evidence that Talc can cause Ovarian Cancer?

There have been concerns for years that using talcum powder, particularly on and around the genitals, may increase the risk of ovarian cancer. However the evidence is not conclusive.



Scientific studies that have found a link between talc and ovarian cancer were mainly retrospective studies; studies which relied on people remembering things they did in the past.

Some of the major weaknesses of these studies are; people may not accurately remember how much talc they used in the past, and women with ovarian cancer may be more likely to remember using talc than women who don't have cancer (known as recall bias).

Scientists can avoid these weaknesses by using studies that start with a group of healthy women and follow them up over time, to see if those who use talc on the genital areas go on to develop ovarian cancer in the future (prospective studies).

So far, there has only been one of these studies looking at talc and ovarian cancer – and it did not find a link with ovarian cancers overall.

5. How Could Talc Cause Cancer?

Some scientists have suggested that talc particles could travel to the ovaries, irritate them and cause inflammation. Low-level, long-term inflammation may increase the risk of some types of cancer, but so far, it does not look like using anti-inflammatory drugs can reduce the risk of ovarian cancer. Also the evidence around whether talc could travel in this way is weak.

6. What are the Risk Factors for Ovarian cancer?

The risk of developing ovarian cancer is affected by a number of factors as with most cancers.

First of all, the risk of ovarian cancer increases with age.

Secondly, women with a family history of breast or ovarian cancer may also be more likely to develop ovarian cancer.

Thirdly, childbearing and hormones are also believed to play a role in the development of ovarian cancer. The more children a woman has the lower the risk of developing ovarian cancer.

Fourthly, taking hormonal medications, such as the Oral Contraceptive Pill (OCP) or Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), can also increase the risk.

Lastly, smoking also increases the risk of ovarian cancer.



7. Are there Talc-Containing Powders on the Ghanaian Market?

Talc containing powders have been registered by the Food and Drugs Authority.

8. What is the FDA Doing to regulate Talc-containing Powders?

The FDA has taken a number of steps including evaluation of the documentation submitted for registration of talc-containing powders to ensure that talc used in these products are certified as asbestos-free; and rigorous Quality Control Laboratory analysis to ensure that the powders presented for registration are asbestos-free.

Going forward, the FDA plans to require manufacturers of talc-containing products to do the following although there is no conclusive evidence that talc causes ovarian cancer.

- Indicate the possible ovarian cancer link with the use of talc-containing powders on the products labels.
- Indicate on the product label the caution that talc-containing powders should not be used in the pelvic areas.
- Require the use of corn starch instead of talc in powders.

9. What should Women Do?

Women who are concerned about the risk of ovarian cancer with the use of Talc can contact the FDA on Mobile: **024 431 0297** or send an email to drug.safety@fdaghana.gov.gh.

If you think you might have any of the risk factors for ovarian cancer as outlined in **6** above, it is a good idea to talk to your Doctor.



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