



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 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.

Current scientific evidence available and a recent scientific study published in the peer-reviewed Journal of the American Medical Association in January 2020 which reviewed over 250,000 women, from four large studies, including questioning and follow up for an average of 11 years found that women who used talc in the venereal regions were not at higher risk of ovarian cancer than those who did not.

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 stringent 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 do not contain asbestos.

Marketing surveillance of registered products is also carried out to verify that talc-containing powders being marketed continue to be free of asbestos.

Additionally, the FDA has since 2018 increased its regulatory activities and put in appropriate measures to ensure public safety in the use of all cosmetic products containing talcum powder.

9. Has any Regulatory Authority Banned Talc-Containing Powders?

No, at the moment no regulatory authority has banned talc-containing powders, below is the list of actions taken by countries.

- i. **Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN):** Issued an Advisory Statement which allowed talc to be used in cosmetic products but should be free of asbestos. The ASEAN Cosmetic Scientific Body indicated that the available evidence assessed globally was inconclusive to establish a link between talc and ovarian cancer. It however, advised that talc-containing powders should be labelled 'Keep powder away from children's nose and mouth' to avoid inhalation,
- ii. **Canada:** The Canadian regulatory agency, Health Canada, carried out a screening assessment on oral and dermal exposures to talc in 2018 but did not identify any human health risks of these exposures.
- iii. **United States of America:** Specific batches of talc-containing cosmetic products were voluntarily recalled in 2019 by the manufacturers and the US Food and Drugs Administration (US FDA) warned consumers not to use the underlisted batches because survey found the batches tested positive for asbestos:



- Johnson and Johnson: Johnson’s Baby Powder (Lot #22318RB)
- Beauty Plus Global: City Color Collection Matte Blush (Fuchsia) and City Color Cosmetics Timeless Beauty Palette
- Beauty Plus Global and Claire’s Stores, Inc.: Beauty Plus Global Contour Effects Palette 2 and Claire’s JoJo Siwa Makeup Set.
- Claire’s cosmetic products: Claire’s Eye Shadows, Claire’s Compact Powder, Claire’s Contour Palette

Additionally, Johnson & Johnson Consumer Health announced in May 2020 that it will discontinue marketing talc-based Johnson’s Baby Powder in U.S. and Canada due to decreasing consumer demand for this product when available stocks are exhausted. The company will however, continue to market the product in other markets around the world.

- iv. **European Union:** There is no restriction on the use of talc in cosmetics products in the European Union, however, the Commission Regulation (EC) No 1223/2009 on cosmetic products (entry 59 of Annex III to the Cosmetics Regulation) requires that talc-containing powders to be used in children less than three years should bear the warning ‘Keep powder away from children's nose and mouth’.

10. What should Women Do?

Women who are concerned about the risk of ovarian cancer with the use of Talc-containing powders should talk to their healthcare professional or contact the FDA on any of the contacts below:

Tel	: 0299802933/054646971	WhatsApp	: 0206973065
Email	: fda@fda.gov.gh	Instagram	: fdaghana
Facebook	: fdaghana	Twitter	: fdaghana_

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.

Additionally, women concerned about the risk of ovarian cancer with the use of talc-containing powders should check product labels for talc and choose talc-free alternatives and there is no need to use powder in the vulva for hygiene reasons.



References

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