

Report on
On
*The Rise in Asbestos--Cancer Concerns with Johnson &
Johnson Talc--Based Baby Powder*



Executive Summary

Despite the ban on Johnson and Johnson Talc-Based Baby Powder in developed countries like the USA and Canada, those banned products are still imported and sold in developing countries like India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, etc.

Johnson and Johnson Baby Powder are already banned in the USA and Canada. In South Asia, India has already found a trace of carcinogenic materials like formaldehyde in baby powders. India's drug regulator has ordered J&J to stop manufacturing Baby Powder using raw materials in two of its Indian factories until test results prove they are free of asbestos. Sri Lanka has also banned imports of the product pending asbestos tests.

However, Bangladesh is yet to address this issue properly. MF Consumers is the importer of the Baby Powder and other famous products of Johnson and Johnson. The Bangladeshi firm imports the powder from the Johnson and Johnson plants in India. As third world countries and developing nations are the main target markets now to sell the J&J talc-based banned powders of developed countries, they are maintaining double standards in these regions. On the other hand, Bangladesh doesn't have enough laboratory support to test and analyze asbestos in these talc-based products both for J&J and local products. For which Bangladesh has to take support from neighboring countries in this regard.

The use of talc-based powders has long been seen usually to brighten one's skin temporarily or to soothe any skin irritation. Talc based baby powders have been very popular for its usefulness in preventing babies' diaper or other skin rashes. Among the other brands, Johnson and Johnson (J & J) talc-based baby powder is on the top in popularity. Talc, naturally occurring mineral-based powders are known as 'Talcum' Powders and with time as scientific research progressed, the association of asbestos with talcum powders has been identified. Asbestos is a group of minerals that occur alongside the talc geologically. Yet not every talc deposit is contaminated with asbestos. The potential ability of asbestos to cause cancer came out through research in the mid-20th century.

Accordingly, J & J baby powders have been tested for the cancer-causing asbestos and found high in content. As a result, the company announced that it would discontinue sales of its talc-based Baby Powder in the U.S.A. and Canada while allowing existing inventory to be sold down in stores until it runs out. The company also said it plans to continue selling the talc-based product globally. Therefore, it seems that the decision to halt their sale in certain regions would protect only a small part of the world while they have their supply chains all over the world. This settlement results in putting the consumers of the other part of the world under risk.

Bangladesh is one of the countries that ratified the Basel Convention in 1993, which suggests that Bangladesh should prohibit the import of asbestos-containing products into the country. Nevertheless, Under 'Import Policy Order' of Bangladesh the chemical banned list does not include 'Asbestos or it containing products'. On the other hand, the Ministry of Commerce is the responsible authority to handle formaldehyde and it's containing products. They have the authority to determine and examine the sales register of importers on a regular basis. Import

Policy Order also does not include any restriction over carcinogenic chemical containing products' import in the list of prohibited goods.

This report is being compiled to highlight the danger of cancer-causing asbestos in talcum powders with a focus on J & J products so that people may be aware of it. Since this brand is a famous one among mothers of the children in our country, this piece of information may enlighten their knowledge of the health impacts of the product. Although the brand is being outdated in the USA and Canada, Bangladesh has not come up with any concrete laboratory-based test results, which should be taken, into consideration by the concerned authorities. Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institute (BSTI) should properly address the situation and take action to test Johnson and Johnson talc-based skin products as well as other local talc-based powder to see the products are containing chemicals in optimal level. On the other hand, Asbestos should be included in the ANNEXURE-3 of Import Policy Order to stop illegal import or use in any imported products.

This report is targeting to build awareness among mass people about the health risk that possess through the use of J&J Talc-Based Baby Powder. This is highly risky for pregnant women and new born babies. Continuous use of these talc-powders can ultimately trigger 'Mesothelioma' which may occur when tumors grow in the lining of the lungs, abdomen or heart. People with mesothelioma usually get it by inhaling or swallowing asbestos for several years. This is now an emerging issue to address as it is directly associated with human health hazard especially for children. Educating the mass people about asbestos and its effects on human health and the natural environment can help to stop use of these products. Asbestos doesn't easily dissolve or evaporate. The places with the most aggravating effects of asbestos exposure have heavy asbestos contamination that can travel to surrounding air and bodies of water. When natural deposits and asbestos products such as talcum powder are blown in the wind, these can remain in the air and water. Smaller asbestos particles can remain in the air for quite some time, and they'll be carried into wind currents and water bodies. Animals inhale asbestos particles in the air or ingest these from water. As well, marine animals ingest asbestos in bodies of water. Since asbestos cannot decompose, the danger remains for a long period of time . Media advocacy on this topic is a necessary part to be highlighted in this report. Media can play a vital role to identify the possible gaps in the authorities and ask them when and how they will determine the issue properly.

In the contrary, albeit Bangladesh has consumer protection acts where there is the prohibition in the sale and marketing of harmful products, this is rarely followed by the manufacturers. So this is highly recommended in this report for the concerned government authorities to go for laboratory-based test results of widely used J & J talc-based baby powders, and if found, immediate actions will need to be taken. While compiling relevant information, we did not get any specific data on the annual import of J & J baby powder, so the report suggests more research and information for further studies.

1. Introduction

One of the popular beauty products, talcum powders have been controversial for its cancer causing phenomenon. Most widely used Johnson and Johnson (J & J) talc based baby powder has been questioned the most for its asbestos content in the products. Talcum powders have been named after its pre-dominant ingredient, Talc, which is found naturally on earth. Asbestos is another group of minerals that are geologically found alongside talc. So depending on the source of talc, asbestos may be associated with this. Different grades of talc may contain varying degrees of asbestos contamination. The World Health Organization's International Agency for Research on Cancer classifies talc that contains asbestos as "*carcinogenic to humans.*" In addition, talc itself can harm infants if inhaled. Thousands of women who used the J & J baby powder developed ovarian cancer and filed lawsuits against the company and finally on 19 May 2020, Johnson and Johnson (J&J) announced that it will discontinue sale of its talc baby powder in the US and Canada. Still J & J plans to continue selling this dangerous product globally, which will negatively impact women of color all over the world. So this double standard of J & J should be brought to attention and as this product is extensively used in Bangladesh especially on babies' skins, we must know the quality of the product. We need to go for laboratory based tests to identify whether the powders are contaminated with asbestos or not.

2. Objectives

This report is completely based on literature review and desk based information. It has been compiled with the following objectives in mind:

- ✓ To educate mass people about the presence of asbestos in talcum powders and its detrimental health and some environmental impacts
- ✓ To sensitize the government for initiatives to facilitate laboratory based asbestos test in J & J talcum baby powders
- ✓ To aware the mass media about the issue and its global concern
- ✓ To express our solidarity with the global campaign of 'J & J Global Week of Action' starting from 31st August-5th September, 2020

3. Preamble

2.1 What is talcum powder?

Talcum powder is made from talc, a mineral made up mainly of the elements magnesium, silicon, and oxygen. As a powder, it absorbs moisture well and helps cut down on friction, making it useful for keeping skin dry and helping to prevent rashes. It is widely used in cosmetic products such as baby powder and adult body and facial powders, as well as in a number of other consumer products. In its natural form, some talc contains asbestos, a substance known to cause cancers in and around the lungs when inhaled.¹ In Bangladesh talcum powder is very popular among people of wide age range. Among others, the gohanson's (J & J) baby powder is the most popular as both baby and adult skin care product.

2.2 What is asbestos:

Asbestos is a group of minerals that occur naturally as bundles of fibers. These fibers are found in soil and rocks in many parts of the world. They are made mainly of silicon and oxygen, but they also contain other elements. There are 2 main types of asbestos Chrysotile and Amphibole. Asbestos fibers can be useful because they are strong, resistant to heat and to many chemicals, and do not conduct electricity. As a result, asbestos has been used as an insulating material since ancient times. Since the industrial revolution, asbestos has been used to insulate factories, schools, homes, and ships, and to make automobile brake and clutch parts, roofing shingles, ceiling and floor tiles, cement, textiles, and hundreds of other products.²

2.3 Story behind the presence of Asbestos in talcum powder

Talc is the softest mineral on earth. It is used in industrial products and consumer products. The most widely used consumer talc product is talcum powder. Finely crushed talcum powder is valued for its ability to absorb moisture and provide lubrication at the same time. People have used talcum powder products to dry, protect and perfume their skin for more than a century. Geologically, talc and asbestos can naturally form alongside each other. Not every talc deposit is contaminated with asbestos. Whether a particular talc product contains asbestos has everything to do with its geologic source. If the talc deposit contains asbestos or asbestiform minerals, the

¹ <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/cancer-causes/talcum-powder-and-cancer.html>

² <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/cancer-causes/asbestos.html>

products made with that talc are likely contaminated with asbestos. Talc used in cosmetics also has a history of asbestos contamination. The contamination has primarily involved talcum powder products.

4. What's the problem?

3.1 Health is harmed:

Evidence from studies in both people and lab animals has shown that asbestos can increase the risk for some types of cancer. When asbestos fibers in the air are inhaled, they can stick to mucus in the throat, trachea (windpipe), or bronchi (large breathing tubes of the lungs) and might be cleared by being coughed up or swallowed. But some fibers reach the ends of the small airways in the lungs or penetrate into the outer lining of the lung and chest wall (known as the *pleura*). These fibers can irritate the cells in the lung or pleura and eventually cause lung cancer or mesothelioma.³

Inhalation of asbestos fibers has been linked to an increased risk of lung cancer in many studies of asbestos-exposed workers. This increased risk is seen with all forms of asbestos (there is no “safe” type of asbestos in terms of lung cancer risk). In general, the greater the exposure to asbestos, the higher the risk of lung cancer. Most cases of lung cancer in asbestos workers occur at least 15 years after first exposure to asbestos. In workers exposed to asbestos who also smoke, the lung cancer risk is even greater than adding the risks from these exposures separately. Mesothelioma is a fairly rare form of cancer that most often affects the thin linings of the organs in the chest (pleura) and abdomen (peritoneum).

Mesothelioma is closely linked with asbestos exposure. All forms of asbestos have been linked to mesothelioma, although amphibole asbestos appears to cause this cancer at lower levels of exposure than chrysotile asbestos. Most cases of mesothelioma result from exposure to asbestos at work. There is also an increased risk of mesothelioma among family members of workers and people living in neighborhoods near asbestos factories and mines. Although the risk of mesothelioma increases with the amount of asbestos exposure, there is no clear safe level of

³ <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/cancer-causes/asbestos.html>

asbestos exposure in terms of mesothelioma risk. Mesotheliomas typically take a long time to develop. The time between first exposure to asbestos and diagnosis of mesothelioma is usually 30 years or more. Unfortunately, the risk of mesothelioma does not drop with time after exposure to asbestos. The risk appears to be lifelong.⁴

3.1.1 Does all talcum powder cause mesothelioma?

Current research indicates that pure talc does not cause mesothelioma. But talc that is contaminated with asbestos and asbestiform minerals has led to the development of mesothelioma. In 2019, a study published in the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine presented case studies of 33 people with mesothelioma whose only exposure to asbestos was through the use of asbestos-contaminated talcum powder. Not all talcum powder contains asbestos, but some of the talc sourced for talcum powder is naturally contaminated with asbestos. That means some talcum powder products are contaminated with asbestos and some are not.⁵

3.1.2 Other types of cancer

Studies have also found clear links between workplace exposure to asbestos and cancers of the larynx (voice box) and ovaries. Some studies have also suggested that workplace asbestos exposure may be linked to other cancers, including cancers of the pharynx (throat), stomach, colon, and rectum. However, the link between these cancers and asbestos is not as clear as it is for the other cancers discussed here. For cancer of the throat, the link is strongest for the hypopharynx, the part of the throat closest to the larynx (voice box). It's not clear exactly how asbestos might affect risk for these cancers, but swallowed asbestos fibers might somehow contribute to the risk.⁶

The controversy over talc's safety extends to which companies are now liable when people develop asbestos-related cancers such as mesothelioma. In recent years, asbestos talc lawsuits have resulted in several multimillion-dollar verdicts and settlements. Certain brands of talcum powder have tested positive for asbestos in the past. Whether a talc product contains asbestos

⁴ <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/cancer-causes/asbestos.html>

⁵ <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/cancer-causes/asbestos.html>

⁶ <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/cancer-causes/asbestos.html>

depends upon where the talc was sourced. Some talc mines are contaminated with asbestos and some are not.

5. Environmental Impact:

4.1.1 Destroys Natural Habitats

Talc is mined from the earth alongside asbestos. This explains asbestos contamination in talc products. In the process of mining talc, natural habitats are destroyed. Dynamite is used for blasting mining areas. As a result, the surrounding area is left with huge blocks and mining waste. For instance, several reports show that talc mining is threatening tiger sanctuaries in India. A few years back, there were about 20,000 tigers in India but, because of these mining ventures that supply talc to Western cosmetic companies, even conservation efforts could not stabilize the tiger population.

One of a leading consumer goods company was reportedly one of the biggest companies that source their talc supply from mines in tiger sanctuaries such as the Sariska Tiger Reserve and Jamwa Ramgarh Wildlife Sanctuary.

Despite environmental laws to protect these tigers, they are now nearing extinction. These companies should practice environmental responsibility, yet they failed not just on your health, but the environment too.⁷

4.1.2 Air and Water Pollution

Asbestos doesn't easily dissolve or evaporate. The places with the most aggravating effects of asbestos exposure have heavy asbestos contamination that can travel to surrounding air and bodies of water. When natural deposits and asbestos products such as talcum powder are blown in the wind, these can remain the air and water supply.

Smaller asbestos particles can remain in the air for quite some time, and they'll be carried into wind currents and water bodies. Animals inhale asbestos particles in the air or ingest these from

⁷ <https://blueandgreentomorrow.com/environment/asbestos-in-talcum-powder-and-its-effects-on-health-and-the-planet/>

water. As well, marine animals ingest asbestos in bodies of water. Since asbestos cannot decompose, the danger remains for long periods of time. Health consequences follow.⁸

6. Import of J & J situation in Bangladesh:

Since the import of J & J situation has not been extensively explored in Bangladesh, we relied on the desk based information in this regard. Directory of Johnson and Johnson Bangladesh Manufacturers provides list of Johnson and Johnson Bangladesh products supplied by quality Johnson and Johnson bangladesh manufacturers, suppliers and wholesalers. Almost 70 Johnson and Johnson supplied by Bangladesh Johnson and Johnson Manufacturers & Companies while 301 Johnson and Johnson Suppliers & Exporters are there in Bangladesh. 2104 Johnson and Johnson Buyers & Importers are recorded in the country.⁹

7. Johnson and Johnson double standard:

News publishes that the pharmaceutical giant Johnson & Johnson has stopped selling its talcum-based Johnson's baby powder in the United States and Canada as part of a broad reassessment of its consumer product portfolio. The company is facing lawsuits from thousands of customers, who say use of the firm's talc products caused cancer. Investors have also sued the company over its disclosures about the issue. Johnson & Johnson maintains that the baby powder is "safe and asbestos-free, and does not cause cancer".¹⁰

Despite J&J's announcement that they would stop selling its iconic talc-based baby powder in North America, the company has a global supply chain and distribution network that continues to mine, grind, mix, package and ship its talc-baby powder around the world. J&J has six production hubs worldwide for talc-based baby powder:

- São José dos Campos, São Paulo, Brazil which supplies Brazil and Paraguay.
- Cali, Colombia which supplies the Americas, Europe and the Middle East.
- Baddi, Himachal Pradesh, India which supplies South Asia.
- Mulund, Mumbai, India which supplies South Asia.
- Parañaque City, Philippines which Supplies the Philippines.

⁸ <https://blueandgreentomorrow.com/environment/asbestos-in-talcum-powder-and-its-effects-on-health-and-the-planet/>

⁹ <https://bangladesh.tradeford.com/johnson-and-johnson>

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/may/19/johnson-johnson-baby-powder-us-canada>

➤ East London, South Africa which Supplies sub-Saharan Africa.



Talc mixed and packaged in these plants originates from mines in China (Guiguang Talc), India (Golcha Group), and Brazil (IMI Fabi). Golcha and IMI Fabi operate grinders in India, Thailand, and Brazil that supply milled talc to J&J. In addition, Imerys Talc has a grinding operation in Houston, Texas that mills talc from China and ships it to J&J's Colombia hub.

In Bangladesh, MF Consumers is the importer of the Baby Powder and other famous products of Johnson and Johnson. The Bangladeshi firm imports the powder from the Johnson and Johnson plants in India.

India's drug regulator has initiated a wider probe into the entire range of baby care products of Johnson and Johnson (J&J) Pvt. Ltd, after ordering it to halt production of its Johnson's baby powder amid allegations that it contains asbestos in 2018.

India's drugs regulator has ordered J&J to stop manufacturing Baby Powder using raw materials in two of its Indian factories until test results prove they are free of asbestos. Sri Lanka has also banned imports of the product pending asbestos tests.

8. Bangladesh Law:

According to the Consumers' Right Protection Act, 2009 of Bangladesh, in exercise of the powers conferred by section 82 of the consumers' Right Protection Act, 2009 (Act No. 26 of 2009), (S.R.O. No. 08-Law/2014), there is prohibition on manufacturing, selling etc. of goods injurious to human health. If any goods are proved to be particularly harmful to human health, the Government, on recommendation of the Director General, may, by notification in the official Gazette, issue direction for stopping the production, import, marketing, sale, display for sale, distribution, transportation for commercial purpose or commercial use of those goods completely all over the country or in any specific area, or for regulating or conducting those activities on such terms and conditions as may be specified in the notification.

In addition, Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institute (BSTI) has specific regulations on Skin powder for babies under BDS 1844:2011. This standard prescribes requirements and methods of sampling and test for skin powder for babies. In addition, in skin powders (First Revision) under BDS 1337:2015, Prescribed the requirements and the methods of sampling and test.

As asbestos contaminated J & J talc based baby powders are controversial for their carcinogenic phenomenon, the concerned authority of Bangladesh tries to conduct laboratory test for alleged cancer-causing asbestos in J & J talc based baby powders but failed to do so in local laboratories. Therefore, BSTI talked to the manufacturers of the J & J several times to conduct the tests by themselves but they did not come back with the results so far. As such, the initiative to bring about the laboratory test results of the presence of cancer-causing asbestos in the powder should

be taken immediately. Under these circumstances, we cannot feel safe to use J & J talc based baby powders unless we get the evidence based test results in the country.

9. Recommendation:

Ensuing babies a safe and sound environment is one of our core responsibilities. Hence we may not introduce them or their skin with such products that impact on their health detrimentally. One of the popular baby products, J & J talc based baby powders are known for containing asbestos for decades in the US. Although they stopped their sale in the US, they have long supply chain all over the world. Therefore, considering the probable risk of asbestos containing baby talcum powder we may recommend the concerned authorities of our country the followings:

- The J & J baby talc powders must be tested for alleged cancer-causing asbestos
- The testing methods must be reliable and tests should be done in government authorized laboratories
- The consumer act of ‘prohibition on manufacturing, selling etc. of goods injurious to human health’ must be followed and regularly monitored
- To raise voice against the double standard of J & J to stop sale in USA but not in the other continents
- Public must be educated about the harmful health impact of asbestos containing talcum baby powders so that they may automatically reduce the use of the harmful product

10. Conclusion:

The concern of asbestos in J & J talc based baby powders has raised much and as a result the product has been banned in developed countries like the USA, Canada. Still the products are on sale in the other parts of the world including Asian and South Asian countries. Unfortunately it is not evidenced in Bangladesh whether the J & J talcum baby powders or other talc based powders are free of asbestos or not. Considering the adverse health and environmental impacts, we must be sure about the products having the laboratory based asbestos tests. Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institutions can play a vital role in this regard. Apart from these, knowledge about the danger of the presence of asbestos in such products should be disseminated among mass people. A global campaign is being run against this menacing element’s presence in J & J talc based baby powders so we should also show our solidarity with the movement in Bangladesh.