



Community Conversations on Skin Lightening Guide and Toolkit





Skin Lightening Products are Potentially Dangerous

The use of skin lightening products has become a global health concern, drawing the attention of doctors and health experts worldwide. In 2020, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) alerted consumers that skin lightening products containing hydroquinone and marketed as over-the-counter (OTC) drugs or cosmetics are unapproved and are not generally recognized as safe and effective (not GRASE; U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2022a). Additionally, the FDA has required that hydroquinone must be prescribed by a medical professional and the FDA does not allow mercury in drugs or in cosmetics, except under very specific conditions where there are no other safe and effective preservatives available (U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2022a, 2022b).

Many individuals who use skin lightening products are unaware of the potential risks and may assume the products are safe simply because they are available for purchase.

The FDA has received reports of serious side effects from the use of hydroquinone, including rashes, facial swelling, and permanent skin discoloration (ochronosis). Mercury is a highly toxic metal that can damage the nervous, digestive, and immune systems, as well as the lungs, kidney s, skin, and eyes. To address these dangers, Communication and Culture, LLC is partnering with nonprofit, faith-based, and community organizations to inform the public that products containing hydroquinone or mercury are not FDA-approved for over-the-counter sale and may pose serious health risks.

Communication and Culture, LLC is actively collaborating with community leaders to raise awareness about the safe use of skin lightening products, with a particular focus on communities with darker skin tones. This includes, but is not limited to, Black or African American, Hispanic/Latino, South Asian, and other marginalized groups. By partnering with trusted voices within these communities, we aim to educate individuals about the potential risks associated with certain ingredients, such as hydroquinone and mercury, and to promote informed decisions regarding skin care.

Why Community Conversations?

It's important for community leaders to lead the conversation about the potential risk and harm associated with the use of skin lightening products that contain hydroquinone or mercury. This helps ensure that the information is shared in a way that respects and understands the culture of the community. Whether the leader is a faith leader, health professional, teacher, or member of a community group, it's crucial that they be recognized as part of the community so that the information feels real and honest, as people are more likely to listen and believe when trusted leaders talk about important health issues.





How Can I Help?

- **Create a Space for Open Discussion:** Provide a safe place where people can openly talk about skin lightening.
- **Have Trusted Community Leaders Guide the Conversation:** Make sure respected leaders from the community are the ones leading the discussion.
- **Share Important Information:** Discuss research that's specific to the community, including history, gender roles, language, society's views, safety of ingredients, consumer rights, and what the FDA says about these products. Also, talk about how advertising can influence decisions.
- **Promote Smart Choices:** Encourage people to make informed decisions about using skin lightening products, focusing on health and safety based on FDA information.



Toolkit for Community Conversations (CCs) about Skin Lightening

Audience

Consider who would benefit most from attending the conversation. Invite a diverse group of individuals from communities that may have been impacted by messages and ads promoting skin lightening products. This could include people from various groups with darker skin tones. This includes, but is not limited to, Hispanic or Latino populations, South Asian, Caribbean, and Black or African American women. Since the conversation is educational, it's important to invite both those who use these products and those who don't.

Timeline

Getting ready a few weeks (or months) in advance will help make sure everything goes smoothly. Here's an example of a schedule to follow:

- **Select a date:** 2 months before the event
- **Consider who to invite:** 6 weeks before the event
- **Send out invitations:** 3-4 weeks before the event
- **Send out reminder:** 1 week before the event

Invitations

Decide whether you will send individual invitations, share a public announcement, or do both (see the sample invitation in Appendix A). If you choose to send invitations, you will need to gather physical and/or email addresses. Be sure to consider guests who can attend in person as well as those who may join remotely.

Meeting Format

The format of these community conversations (CCs) can be flexible. Decide on a format (virtual or in-person) that will work best for your community:

- **In-Person:** If the meeting is in-person, consider things like the location, cost, room setup, speakers, and how easy it is for people to get there. You can print out resource materials or handouts to give out during the meeting or send them by email afterward. A PowerPoint presentation can help keep the discussion organized, and it can also be used to show a short video.
 - **Online:** If the meeting is online, consider what the hosting platform can handle and what technology is needed. You can share electronic resource documents during the meeting or email them to participants.
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The meeting should last between 60 - 90 minutes. This will allow enough time to share information and have a good discussion. Consider recording the event to help create a summary of the conversation and take some photos or video to capture the event.

Meeting Agenda & Facilitator's Guide

Below is a sample meeting agenda that you can adjust based on your group. You might want to include special guests, like a skin care expert or someone from the community who has used skin lightening products.

- **Welcome and Ice Breaker:** [10 minutes]
- **Presentation of Community-specific Research:** Videos, Advertising trends, & Safety [25 minutes]
- **Key Takeaways and Discussion:** [15 minutes]
- **Closing (Optional):** Do a quick feedback survey on the session (Appendix C) and/or share a resource handout (Appendix D) [10 minutes]
- **Incentive (Optional):** Hold a drawing for a \$25 Amazon gift card





After the Conversation (Optional)

Follow up with participants through thank you notes, a summary of the session and basic themes that emerged from the CC, feedback on the session (Appendix C), or relevant resource websites (Appendix D).

1. Follow-Up Communication:

- **Send a Thank-You Email:** Express appreciation to participants for attending and contributing to the conversation. Include a brief summary of the key points discussed.
- **Share Additional Resources:** Provide links to resources, articles, or videos related to the safe use of skin lightening products, the dangers of hydroquinone and mercury, and general skin care tips for people with darker skin tones.
- **Distribute the Meeting Summary:** Share a detailed summary of the discussion, including any important takeaways, recommendations, or action items.

2. Encourage Continued Education:

- **Host Regular Discussions:** Plan follow-up meetings or webinars to continue the conversation and address any new developments or questions that arise.
- **Organize Workshops:** Arrange educational workshops on related topics such as healthy skin care practices, understanding product labels, and how to recognize harmful ingredients.

3. Build Community Action:

- **Form a Task Force or Committee:** Encourage participants to join a group dedicated to raising awareness about the risks associated with skin lightening products and promoting safe alternatives.
- **Partner with Local Organizations:** Collaborate with local health clinics, schools, and community groups to spread awareness and provide educational materials to a broader audience.

4. Engage in Advocacy:

- **Support Policy Change:** Work with local lawmakers or health departments to advocate for stricter regulations on the sale and marketing of skin lightening products that contain harmful ingredients.
 - **Promote Safe Alternatives:** Encourage the promotion of safe and culturally respectful skin care products through partnerships with local businesses or health organizations.
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5. Monitor and Evaluate Impact:

- **Collect Feedback:** After the conversation, gather feedback from participants to understand the effectiveness of the discussion and identify areas for improvement.
- **Track Outcomes:** Monitor any changes in community behavior or awareness following the conversation, such as a decrease in the use of harmful skin lightening products or increased interest in safer alternatives.

6. Leverage Social Media and Online Platforms:

- **Create an Online Group:** Establish a social media group or online forum where participants can continue to share information, ask questions, and support each other.
- **Share Success Stories:** Highlight positive changes or testimonials from community members who have made informed decisions about skin care, inspiring others to do the same.



Our Commitment to Health Equity

Communication and Culture, LLC is dedicated to fostering community conversations that help people make informed health choices. We are committed to equipping leaders to hold discussions about the potential risks and harms of using over-the-counter skin lightening products that contain hydroquinone or mercury. We believe that partnering with community organizations and leaders is one of the most effective ways to raise public health awareness. This guide has been created to support that effort.

Our Mission:

At Communication and Culture, we are committed to advancing health equity by transforming how organizations approach communication, culture, and diversity. We achieve our mission by assisting nonprofit public health organizations with services such as strategic communication, strategic planning, organizational development, and team building. Our work is rooted in collaboration, organizational assessments, and evidence-based practices. By applying our insights in practical ways, we empower organizations to reach their goals.

Our Vision:

We envision a world where health equity is not just an ideal but a reality for everyone, with healthcare recognized as a basic human right. To realize this vision, CCLLC partners with organizations to prioritize performance, diversity, inclusion, and equity. We are dedicated to this cause, working across local communities and on the global stage.





Appendix A: CC Invitation Sample

Community Conversation about Skin Lightening

Date, Time

Location

RSVP date, email

[Community Organizer/organization] has partnered with Communication and Culture, LLC, to invite you to a discussion about the use of skin lightening products. In this meeting, we will discuss the historical promotion of skin lightening products within our communities and information from FDA's OMHHE SkinFacts campaign. The discussion will be led by [Facilitator] and will last between 60 - 90 mins.

We hope you'll consider joining us for this discussion!

If you have any questions, please contact [facilitator email].





Appendix B: Facilitator's Guide

I. Welcome and Introduction and Icebreaker [10 min]

Purpose: *To provide an overview of the community conversation, share the purpose of the event, and discuss house rules. The ice breaker helps attendees feel comfortable.*

Script:

A. Welcome and Introduction:

Hello. My name is _____. I'd like to start by thanking each of you for taking the time to participate in this discussion. We'll be here for about 60 minutes.

I'm going to lead our session today. The topic for today is skin lightening; more specifically, I will share some information on the use and safety of the products as well as some research on how they have been historically advertised, particularly to women with darker skin tones. I want to encourage you to share your ideas as I facilitate the discussion.

We have partnered with Communication and Culture, LLC (CCLLC), a small, woman-owned consulting firm, to conduct this Community Conversation. CCLLC has investigated advertising trends over the past 8 decades from magazines targeting women with darker skin tones, and we'll share some of those findings.

I will provide contact information at the end of this session so you may contact me if you have any further questions.

Let's review a few house rules before moving on:

- Please keep your phones on mute. If you must take a call, feel free to leave and rejoin us as quickly as you can.
- This is an open and honest conversation. We respect everyone's opinion even if we do not agree with them.
- There are no right or wrong answers, only differing points of view. Let's take turns sharing our views.

B. Icebreaker

Now that we have all the housekeeping announcements out of the way, let's begin our interactive discussion! We will start with an icebreaker so we can learn a little more about each other.

Please introduce yourself and share your first name. Tell us why you are attending this discussion today.



II. Topic Intro and Relevance of Community-Specific Research [25 min]

Purpose: *Share two videos presenting key findings of skin lightening advertisement content over eight decades. Consider the safety of ingredients in skin lightening products. Elicit discussion of personal views on the videos and topic.*

Script:

Now that we've heard from some of you, let me share some information about the skin lightening advertisement identified in CCLLC's research study. These ads came from almost eight decades of magazines.

A. View Videos and Brief Summary

Let's look at two short videos that have been created by the team. After we watch them, please feel free to share your opinions. Is there one video you prefer over the other? Why?

You will notice that the factual content in each one is identical; this is the information from the research study of advertisements. So, it would help us if you share your opinions about the different presentation of the information.

[Note to facilitator: show video 1]

[Note to facilitator: show video 2]

Very briefly, to summarize, here are the key findings presented in both videos:

- Gender - the majority of advertisements featured images of women. Even in early ads before the 1970s that included both men and women, the messaging was clearly targeted at women, suggesting that they could become more desirable and attract a partner by having lighter skin.
- Language in early advertisements often included terms like 'ugly,' 'white,' and 'bleach,' which, perhaps unsurprisingly, are rarely seen in more recent ads. When it came to providing information about ingredients or safety, early ads offered little meaningful detail. They often made broad claims about 'miracle' ingredients and suggested the products were scientifically safe, sometimes citing doctor recommendations. While current ads still reference science, emphasizing that products are tested, they now include many more mentions of 'natural' ingredients.

B. Audience Reaction to Videos:

So, let's pause for a moment. What do you think? Who wants to share some of their reactions to the two videos?



Video 1 began with before and after pictures followed by some of the facts. It ended with a message about embracing our natural beauty.

- Did you like that sequence?
- Did you think the message was effective?

Video 2 involved a personal experience.

- What did you like and/or dislike about this message?

[Note to facilitator: Call on volunteers.]

Thank you all for sharing your thoughtful comments! Now, let's focus briefly on a specific ingredient, hydroquinone.

C. Hydroquinone and Mercury:

So, can I see a show of hands of those who have heard of the ingredient hydroquinone? How about mercury?

[Note to facilitator: pause and generally assess overall count – half, hardly anyone, most of you etc.]

Did you know that hydroquinone and mercury are ingredients that have been used in some skin lightening products? Some of the early advertisements mention these ingredients but it was in a positive light.

Hydroquinone is actually an ingredient that is not FDA-approved for over-the-counter sale in the U.S.

If you are wondering why: serious side effects from the use of products with hydroquinone have been reported to cause skin discoloration that may be permanent, rashes, and/or facial swelling. (You can visit FDA Skin Facts at FDA.gov to learn more.)

Mercury in skin lightening products has been banned by the FDA due to serious health problems, such as damage to eyes, lungs, and kidneys; damage to the digestive, immune, and nervous systems; skin rashes and infections; and brown-gray skin discoloration. Mercury poisoning can also result in coma and even death. (Visit FDA Skin Facts at FDA.gov to learn more.)





III. Key Takeaways & Audience Recommendations [15 min]

Purpose: Identify key themes. Solicit discussion of how best to share the message.

Script:

We hope that you gained some interesting information about skin lightening advertisements and products today. We are committed to providing information and soliciting dialogue within our communities so individuals can make informed health choices.

Before we conclude, what do you think are some of the most important takeaways from this discussion? What stood out for you?

[Note to facilitator: Encourage audience sharing takeaways]

For our part, we'd like to encourage you to empower yourself and your loved ones with knowledge. Adopting a safety-first approach and using products with a healthy mindset will ultimately benefit our community.

We'd love to hear your thoughts on the most effective ways to get this message out to our community. How do you think we should share information with your network? Do you have any recommendations for using specific social media?

[Note to Facilitator: Call on volunteers.]

IV. Closing (optional: handout with resources; feedback survey) [10 min]

Purpose: Conclusion. Thank the audience, invite any final comments, and encourage them to share the message.

Script:

We've reached the end of our session. Thank you for generously sharing your time and insights with us. Your contributions are invaluable in helping us identify the best ways to share information within our community. We encourage you to share the key points from today's discussion and continue the conversation with others.

If you have any questions about this meeting, please feel free to contact [Facilitator] or reach out to donnaoti@3cfirm.com.

Optional: Collect feedback on the session (see Appendix C), share relevant resource websites (see Appendix D), and/or conduct a random drawing for an incentive.



Appendix C: Session Feedback

Thank you for joining us for this community conversation. We appreciate your feedback to help improve our outreach efforts. Please rate the following statements by circling one response for each item:

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
I am satisfied with the session overall.	1	2	3	4	5
The information enhanced my knowledge about skin lightening.	1	2	3	4	5
The information is relevant to choices I will make about using skin lightening products.	1	2	3	4	5
I have learned information about skin lightening that I will share with others.	1	2	3	4	5
I would recommend this type of session to others.	1	2	3	4	5

Please feel free to share comments:

Thank you for your valuable time and input!

Appendix D: Helpful Resources and Websites

This information is provided for informational purposes only and, aside from the FDA website, does not imply an endorsement of these sources.

Resource Name	Link
US Food and Drug Administration - Skin Facts!	https://www.fda.gov/skinfacts
US Food and Drug Administration YouTube Video - Skin Facts! What You Need to Know About Skin Lightening Products	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxO-5PPsakE
US Food and Drug Administration Partner Toolkit - Skin Facts!	https://www.fda.gov/consumers/skin-facts-what-you-need-know-about-skin-lightening-products/partner-toolkit
United Nations Environment Programme Global Mercury Partnership - Eliminating Mercury Skin Lightening Products	https://www.unep.org/globalmercurypartnership/our-work/mercury-products/eliminatingmercury-skin-lightening-products
California Department of Public Health - Mercury in Skin Creams	https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CCDPHP/DEODC/EHIB/CPE/Pages/MercuryinSkinCream.aspx
Minnesota Department of Health - Skin Lightening Products Found to Contain Mercury	https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/environment/skin/index.html
New York City Health - Hazardous Products: Mercury in Soaps and Creams	https://www.nyc.gov/site/doh/health/health-topics/mercury-in-soaps-and-creams.page
The Beautywell Project	https://thebeautywell.org/
Skin of Color Society	https://skinofcolorsociety.org/
Skin of Color Society - Educational Video Library	https://skinofcolorsociety.org/discover-patients-public/educational-showcase
World Health Organization Article - Countries Unite to Remove Mercury from Hazardous Skin Lightening Products	https://www.who.int/news/item/14-02-2023-countries-unite-to-remove-mercury-from-hazardous-skin-lightening-products
American Academy of Dermatology Association Article - Board-Certified Dermatologist Warns Consumers about the Dangers of Skin Bleaching to Achieve a Lighter Complexion	https://www.aad.org/news/dangers-skin-bleaching-to-achieve-lighter-complexion
Journal Article - Advancing Health Equity: Efforts to Expand Education on Skin Lightening Products	https://doi.org/10.1177/00333549231213158
Byrdie Article - A Guide to Dissecting Your Skincare Product Labels	https://www.byrdie.com/skincare-ingredient-labels

