

Five Philly-area Black women are suing L'Oreal and other beauty companies over hair-straightening products

The lawsuits brought by Kline and Specter on behalf of Philadelphia women join thousands of similar claims made in courts throughout the country.



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Erica James' hair was first straightened with chemical products when she was about 6 years old.

Like many Black girls, teens, and women, James, now a 47-year-old from North Philadelphia, would apply these products on her hair every six to eight weeks.

The advertisements for the hair relaxers — such as Dark & Lovely, African Pride, and Just for Me — featured Black models with silky hair, and assured consumers that the conditioners were “no-lye,” in contrast to a previous generation of hair-straightening products that had an offensive smell and burned the scalp more.

But in recent years there have been growing concerns that these products had chemicals that increase the risk of reproductive system cancers in women. And because Black women are more likely to use the products, they were at higher risk.

In April 2019, after nearly four decades of using these products, James was diagnosed with uterine cancer, according to court records. A month later she underwent surgery to remove her uterus, ovaries, and fallopian tubes.

Now she is among five local Black women who are suing L’Oreal and other beauty product companies.

In separate lawsuits, filed by the Kline & Specter law firm between May and September in the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas, the women argue that the beauty companies either knew that the products were linked to cancer or didn’t adequately test them for safety.

“Either way, it appears to me that their conduct is indefensible,” said Shanin Specter, who represents the women. “It’s unlawful to market a product that is not safe.”

James and the four other local plaintiffs — Lynda Casurra, Jamia Parker, Cynthia Bennett, and Merle Carter — declined to be interviewed through Specter.

L’Oreal has faced similar lawsuits nationwide, in both state and federal courts. The company said in a statement that it stands by the safety of hair-straightening products manufactured by its subsidiary, SoftSheen-Carson, which produces products such as Dark & Lovely.

“While we understand the desire of each plaintiff to find answers to and relief from their personal health concerns, we are confident in the safety of SoftSheen-Carson’s products and believe the allegations made

in these lawsuits have neither legal nor scientific merit,” the company said in a statement.

Other defendants, including beauty product companies Avlon and Strength of Nature, did not respond to requests for comment through their lawyers.

No-lye

Black women have used painful products to straighten their hair for generations to adhere to societal demands that they have straight hair to appear beautiful and professional. And while there has always been pushback, in recent decades a growing number of Black women demanded their natural hair styles be accepted in the workplace.

The first generation of products to chemically straighten hair from the 1960s used a lye as an active ingredient that would irritate the scalp and weaken hair. The products also had a strong odor.

In the 1970s, beauty product manufacturers began using chemicals such as calcium hydroxide instead, specifically marketing the advantages compared to lye-based products.

“It relaxes my hair just as well as those lye-based relaxers with a lot less burning and irritation, and there is no offensive odor,” the lawsuit quotes dancer and actress Debbie Allen, from a 1980 Dark & Lovely commercial.

Hair-relaxing products were also marketed specifically to young Black girls, the lawsuit states. In 1993, Strength of Nature’s Just for Me product line for young girls was advertised with a commercial featuring LaTavia Roberson, who a few years later joined the music group Destiny’s Child.

But the notion that these products were safe because they were no-lye was not true, the lawsuit contends. The products allegedly contained chemicals that disrupt the hormones that regulate the reproductive system.

What convinced Specter that his firm should look into these cases was a 2022 study published in the Journal of the National Cancer Institute that found a link between the use of chemical hair straighteners and uterine cancers, he said.

Researchers found that women who had used hair-straightening products more than four times in the past year were more than twice as likely to develop uterine cancer compared to those who hadn’t used these products at all.

“Because Black women use hair straightening or relaxer products more frequently and tend to initiate use at earlier ages than other races and ethnicities, these findings may be even more relevant for them,” Che-Jung Chang, one of the study authors, said in a news release.

The National Cancer Institute researchers declined to be interviewed because they do not comment on lawsuits.

In announcing the study results, the authors did add caution to their findings. While the rate of cancer did double in women who used hair relaxers, overall, uterine cancer is rare. And the study was the first of its kind, so more research is needed to fully unpack the relationship between the products and the disease.

L’Oreal noted these caveats in the company’s statement.

“The novel study upon which all these lawsuits is based recognized the need for further research and it made no finding of a causal connection between the use of those products and any conditions alleged by the plaintiffs,” the company’s spokesperson said.

Next steps in the courts

Courts have special processes to deal with the area that is known as mass torts — when a large number of people claim to have suffered harm from the same product or cause.

This type of litigation has been playing out in Philadelphia with the Roundup weed killer trials in Common Pleas Court, and claims of side effects from diabetes and weight loss medications like Ozempic in federal court.

Where the local straightener lawsuit will play out is still unknown.

At least one lawsuit has already been transferred to federal court. Thousands of lawsuits from around the nation making similar claims have been concentrated under one judge in the Northern District of Illinois.

For now, the other Philadelphia cases are proceeding individually.

The discovery process is expected to shed light on what the companies knew about the safety of their products and whether they tested them thoroughly enough, Specter said. Manufacturers have an obligation to put safe products on the market, he said.

“They have to know that it’s safe,” Specter said.