Does Talcum Powder Cause Ovarian Cancer?

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The Link Between Talcum Powder and Ovarian Cancer

Recently, there have been several lawsuits in the news in favor of women whose alleged use of talcum powder over decades contributed to their getting ovarian cancer. The lawsuits, however, do not necessarily prove talcum powder causes ovarian cancer; that conclusion is left to science.

But science is yet to find any real and solid evidence linking the use of talcum powder and ovarian cancer. Some research suggests perineal (genital) use of talcum powder may contribute to ovarian cancer risk, but the evidence isn't clear or consistent.

It is also unclear how actually talcum powder would cause ovarian cancer — one theory is that particles travel from the pelvic area to the ovaries and cause inflammation. Inflammation may eventually cause cancer development and lead to the formation of cancerous tumors.

One 2013 report that analyzed several ovarian cancer/talc studies, published in the journal *Cancer Prevention Research*, finds a possible 20 to 30 percent increased risk for ovarian cancer associated with perineal-powder use.

Here is what you need know about any connection between ovarian cancer and talcum powder use, based on the limited research.

Talc May Contain Asbestos

Talc is a fine, powder-like mineral used in various consumer products, including cosmetics and other personal care products, some foods — such as rice and gum — and even in some medicines.

Talc may be contaminated with asbestos. Asbestos, like talc, is a naturally occurring mineral, and the two are generally found in close proximity to one another in the ground. But asbestos is a carcinogen (a cancer-causing substance).

In the United States, all talcum powder products manufactured domestically have been asbestos-free since the 1970s. But there are talcum-based products that make it into the country from overseas companies and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) cannot assure their safety.

Studies conducted by the FDA in response to recent lawsuits of talc-containing productions, including eye shadow, blush, foundation, face powder, and body powder, did not find any evidence of asbestos fibers in the samples used. The FDA researchers did note the shortcomings of the research, including the small sample size.

The FDA cautioned that the results of the study were informative and not evidence that most or all talc containing products in the United States were asbestos-free.

Talcum Powder Might Be a Risk Factor

Some studies where women reported perineal talcum powder use find a possible small to moderate risk, but other studies don't necessarily agree. One 2016 study, reported in the medical journal *Epidemiology*, found that any increased talc/ovarian cancer link was limited to premenopausal and postmenopausal women.

In premenopausal women, the researchers opined other risk factors could be at play, including breastfeeding, current smoking, alcohol use, and BMI (body mass index). And even with other risk factors of age, family history and genes considered, not every woman who has used talcum powder gets ovarian cancer.

These small studies asking women to report use of talcum powder may be unreliable. And it is unrealistic to ask women to use talcum powder on the perineal area for years and then monitor for development of ovarian tumors.

All in all, there is no way to prove that talcum powder is truly a risk factor for ovarian cancer. And there is no way to accurately rule it out either.

What the WHO Says

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), which is part of the World Health Organization (WHO), categorizes talc that might contain asbestos a carcinogenic. Because there is mixed and limited evidence on a connection between perineal use of talcum powder and ovarian cancer, IARC classifies talcum-based body powders as possibly carcinogenic to humans.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has warned of the dangers of talcum powder as far back as 1969 — not because of ovarian cancer risk, but because if the fine particles are inhaled, they could cause lung problems.

IARC has also opined on the inhaled talc risk, stating while there is limited data on this, some clinical evidence should be taken into account, including one positive animal study.

The Takeaway

It is not quite clear if using talcum powder products will increase your risk for ovarian cancer. The research appears to show a possible link, but some of it is inconclusive.

And many of the clinical studies may not be accurate because they rely on women to recall their use of talcum powder from years prior.

If you are concerned about the connection between talcum powder and ovarian cancer, you may want to limit your use of talcum-containing products or at least stop using them in perineal area. There are alternative options to talcum body powders, including dusting powders containing essential oils, cornstarch, and non-talc-containing powders.