

TO LIGHTEN OR BRIGHTEN

We delve into the loaded topic of skin lightening and the stigma surrounding it.

BY NICOLE LIPPAY

To say that racial issues have been a point of contention in society this year would be a huge understatement. The Internet has proven to be a maelstrom of opinions, from embracing your own ethnicity and preaching your personal values to shunning others and publicly shaming opposing opinions. One particular issue that has garnered a lot of discussion and media attention lately is skin lightening, and whether or not it's ethical to try to change your skin tone.

Skin lightening is a common practice in many South Asian and African cultures, but it was recently brought to light in mainstream North American society due to darker-skinned celebrities like Azealia Banks, who took to social media to defend her choice in using skin lightening products. While the media has certainly come a long way in promoting women of various ethnic backgrounds (this shouldn't be something to pat ourselves on the back for—it is 2016 after all, the "ideal woman" is often still portrayed as white, and this breeds the notion that darker skin isn't desirable.

UNEARTHING THE SKIN LIGHTENING DEBATE

Skin lightening products are most commonly topicals, and they work to block the formation of melanin. "The production of melanin in the skin is created by something called melanocytes in the epidermis, and they're turned off abnormally. It's a multi step process that involves many different chemicals," explains Dr. Frances Jang, MD, FRCPC, a dermatologist at Skinworks in Vancouver. "The 'gold standard' sort of disruptor is hydroquinone, which is a tyrosine inhibitor. In some countries, like Africa, with prolonged use of high-percentage hydroquinone products to try to 'bleach' their skin, people can develop an irreversible hyperpigmentation condition called *chronosis*, which can be quite disfiguring. She continues: "I haven't seen it very much [in Canada], but I did see it in Africa because you could get

the [bleaching topicals] over the counter or illicitly on the market." In Canada, the laws and guidelines in place for skin-care manufacturers are quite rigid, but other countries have varying protocols, so these topicals can contain high percentages of active ingredients that the Canada's Food and Drug Act would consider to be dangerous.

UNDERSTANDING HYPERPIGMENTATION

There's a marked difference between trying to change your skin tone and treating a skin condition such as melasma. Melasma is a fairly common skin condition often referred to as "pregnancy mask," where individuals develop dark patches on their faces that are often exposed to the sun. Women of Latin, Asian or Middle Eastern descent tend to be more susceptible to melasma, and many studies suggest that this is due to the fact that they have more melanocytes in their skin. "When you get a condition like melasma, [melanin] can also be distributed deeper within the epidermis and dermis and it's often a combination of the two, so it's a little tougher to get at because it's deeper," says Dr. Jang. There are a variety of treatment options available, but for conditions like melasma, there's no cure it's just suppressing it and making it more livable, explains Dr. Jang.

DEBUNKING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LIGHTENING AND BRIGHTENING

When we think of brightening our

complexion, the social implication of this often refers to anti-aging and rejuvenation, removing age spots and discoloration from sun damage. Intense pulse light therapy (IPL) treats sun damage, but "When it comes to dark spots caused by sun damage, the IPL laser targets pigmentation and extracts it closer to the surface so that it can be naturally shed in the skin renewal process," explains Nazrene Khan, head medical aesthetician at Uxbridge Medi & Day Spa. The majority of IPL technologies are safe for darker skin, but "in our clinic we always do a patch test to gauge how the client will. When working with any IPL laser, it's better to be safe than sorry." Every client will differ, but "on average five or six treatments will do the job in combination with a good skin-care regimen," explains Khan.

COST: \$150 for a full facial with IPL treatment

EMBRACE YOUR SKIN COLOUR

Altering your appearance is always a personal decision and, at the end of the day, you should be feel confident and sexy in your own skin. While it can be argued that applying makeup or dyeing your hair is changing the colour of your complexion, these methods are far safer than trying to drastically change your skin's pigmentation. By taking good care of your skin and respecting and embracing your natural beauty, you'll create a far healthier relationship with yourself—and that's what matters. ☺

5 BRIGHTENERS

PHOTO: THINKSTOCK

Now that you've learned that brightening the skin is completely safe (and also different than lightening), we've scouted out our favourite items to help you revive a dull complexion.



1. VivierSkin Skin Brightening Cream (\$94, physicians' offices) This cream simultaneously brightens and sloughs off dead skin cells to boost your complexion.



2. Skin Authority Instant Perfection Peel Pads (\$69, Murale) This leave-on peel solution is gentle enough for everyday use, so you can exfoliate away any dead skin buildup that will leave your skin looking dull.



3. Rejucidare Illumin Skin Brightening Kit (\$158, rgrpharma.com) This duo promises visible results in just two weeks, by disrupting the production of melanin with four per cent alpha-arbutin.



4. Dr. Bauman Liposome Multi-Active Vitamin E + C (\$139, physicians' office) Vitamin C brightens and vitamin E nourishes, and this ampoule is loaded with free-radical-fighting heroes to protect skin from UV damage.



5. Reversa Anti-Spot Brightening Serum (\$48, Shoppers Drug Mart) Boost the effects of your skin treatments with this potent serum that's ultra-moisturizing.