

Wednesday 19 April 2023

To: Nicolas Hieronimus, CEO of L'Oréal Group

Jean Paul Agon Chairman of L'Oréal Group

Are your hair relaxers putting Black women's health at risk?

In 2021, Oxford University published damning research that found a link between long-term use of hair relaxers containing lye and a 30% increased risk of breast cancer for Black women¹. L'Oréal is one of the biggest manufacturers of lye-based hair relaxers, which you market specifically at Black women, which is why in August 2021, Level Up and more than 5,000 petition signers asked you to remove cancerous chemicals from these products. To date, you have still not responded to us.

Last year further studies linked frequent, long-term use of hair relaxers containing lye to more than double the risk of developing uterine cancer for Black women². As you will know, thousands of lawsuits have been filed against L'Oréal over the last decade in relation to the harm caused by the toxic ingredients in your hair relaxers - from scalp burns and permanent hair loss³, to fibroids and uterine cancer⁴. Why are lye-based L'Oréal products still being sold when they are risking Black women's health around the world?

Black women should be able to trust that the products we use won't hurt us, but Level Up's 2022 survey⁵ found that 95% of Black British women don't

¹ Patricia F Coogan, Lynn Rosenberg, Julie R Palmer, Yvette C Cozier, Yolanda M Lenzy, Kimberly A Bertrand, Hair product use and breast cancer incidence in the Black Women's Health Study, *Carcinogenesis*, Volume 42, Issue 7, July 2021, Pages 924–930, <https://doi.org/10.1093/carcin/bgab041>

² Che-Jung Chang, PhD, Katie M O'Brien, PhD, Alexander P Keil, PhD, Symielle A Gaston, PhD, Chandra L Jackson, PhD, Dale P Sandler, PhD, Alexandra J White, PhD, MSPH, Use of Straighteners and Other Hair Products and Incident Uterine Cancer, *JNCI: Journal of the National Cancer Institute*, Volume 114, Issue 12, December 2022, Pages 1636–1645, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jnci/djac165>

³ [L'Oréal Is Accused Of Selling A Product That Allegedly Made Women Bald](#)

⁴ [Dozens of lawsuits claim hair relaxers cause cancer and other health problems | US news | The Guardian](#)

⁵ Online survey of 1,024 Black British women aged 25-44 (2022).

<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/black-hair-relaxers-side-effects-b2085554.html>

trust beauty brands that sell lye-based relaxers. This should come as no surprise since L'Oréal's hair relaxers continue to be sold, including those intended for children, labelled as "no-lye" whilst listing sodium hydroxide (lye) in the ingredients. How can we make informed decisions about products without transparency from manufacturers?

Now is the time for L'Oréal to lead the way in the beauty industry by taking responsibility for the harms caused by your products. We know that Black women's money matters to you so we're calling on L'Oréal to demonstrate Black women matter too. Take action now to ensure:

- **A safe choice - make the products safe to use or take them off the shelves.** Black women use hair relaxers for a number of reasons: to avoid discrimination at work and in schools, because they find their hair easier to manage or simply because they want to. You have a duty of care to provide safe products to your paying customers. If you are not able to do that, the products should be removed from the shelves. No one should risk losing their life, their fertility or have their quality of life negatively impacted from using hair products. People will straighten their hair - make it a safe choice.
- **A transparent choice - make the nature of the ingredients and possible harms clear on the product label/packaging.** The correlation with cancer does not come from the misuse of the product, it's a risk consumers are exposed to from using the products as intended. If products are to remain on the shelves, with the current ingredients, they should clearly state that chemical hair straighteners have been linked to an increased risk of cancer and fibroids. This should be clearly visible, easy-to-read labelling - you shouldn't have to be a chemist to be able to make a transparent choice.
- **An informed choice - invest in research about the long-term impact of these ingredients and products on Black women.** While

“all of [y]our ingredients and products undergo rigorous safety evaluations before they are placed on the market”, they may not be showing the impact of long-term use. Level Up requested the safety sheets on 14th March 2022 for just two of your hair relaxers to better understand the testing and its findings. Once again, we have yet to receive a direct reply from L’Oréal.

We know you have a commitment to being “number one in the world” regarding ethics but the harm caused to Black women by frequent and long-term use of chemical straighteners, some of which you make, doesn’t align with that. There is a growing, but small, body of longitudinal research that looks at the impact of certain hair products on Black women. Investing in this kind of research and making it publicly accessible is a valuable reparative step. This research should be carried out by independent bodies who cannot be influenced by L’Oréal. Help customers make an informed choice.

We believe these are important steps to begin to address the impact of these products. Black women already spend up to nine times more⁶ than any other group on hair care, we shouldn’t be paying with our health too.

The price of beauty should never be our health.

Yours sincerely,

Ikamara Larasi, Seyi Falodun-Liburd, Ruvimbo Kuuzabuwe and the Level Up team

Dawn Butler MP, Member of Parliament

Mandu Reid, Leader of the UK Women's Equality Party

Leanne Pero, Black Women Rising

⁶ [The beauty industry is still failing black women](#)

Andrea Simon, Director, End Violence Against Women Coalition

Deniz Uğur, Deputy Director, End Violence Against Women Coalition

Apsana Begum MP, Member of Parliament

Lekia Lée, Campaigner

Reproductive Justice Initiative

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Farzana Khan, Executive Co-director, Healing Justice Ldn

Kafayat Okanlawon, Founder, House of Lavender

Marcia Willis-Stewart, KC (Hon), Coram Chambers

Sabrina Qureshi, Founding Coordinator, Million Women Rise

Chloe Pierre, Author of "Take Care - The Black Women's Wellness Guide"

Issathicknation, Plus size model / content creator

Karen Nyame KG

Lolly Adefope, Actor

Mysie, Musician

Nyome Nicholas - Williams (CurvyNyome), Model/Body love advocate

Sophie Williams, Author

Taffy, Make-Up Artist and Influencer

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Ian Byrne MP, Member of Parliament

Ian Lavery MP, Member of Parliament

Mohammad Yasin MP, Member of Parliament

Paulette Hamilton MP, Member of Parliament

Rachael Maskell MP, Member of Parliament for York Central

Tony Lloyd MP, Member of Parliament

Rt Hon Valerie Vaz MP, Member of Parliament Walsall South

Virendra Sharma MP, Member of Parliament for Ealing Southall

References / Links

1. [Hair product use and breast cancer incidence in the Black Women's Health Study | Carcinogenesis | Oxford Academic](#)
2. [#NoMoreLyes Take toxic hair relaxers off the shelves - Level Up](#)
3. [Majority of Black British women suffer side effects from hair relaxers such as burnt scalp, study finds](#)
4. [Use of Straighteners and Other Hair Products and Incident Uterine Cancer | JNCI: Journal of the National Cancer Institute | Oxford Academic](#)
5. [US woman files lawsuit against L'Oréal, claiming chemical hair straightening products are linked to her cancer | CNN](#)
6. [Watch The David Rubenstein Show: L'Oreal CEO Jean-Paul Agon \(Video\) - Bloomberg](#)
7. [Black Consumers Spend Nine Times More In Hair & Beauty: Report](#)
8. [Black Impact: Consumer Categories Where African Americans Move Markets](#)
9. [The beauty industry is still failing black women](#)
10. [Spending Insights | Treasure Tress - The Untapped Opportunity in UK Afro Haircare Market](#)
11. [This is why black women unfairly spend so much money on their hair](#)