

Oregon OSHA, 350 Winter St. NE, Room 430, Salem, Oregon 97301-3878

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Contact information:
Melanie Mesaros, Public Information Officer
503-580-5689 (cell)
melanie.l.mesaros@state.or.us

Oregon OSHA reiterates caution to salons using hair-smoothing products

Additional testing confirms significant formaldehyde levels

(Salem) – The Oregon Department of Consumer and Business Services, Occupational Safety and Health Division (Oregon OSHA) today issued an alert to Oregon hair salons about the presence of formaldehyde in products used to smooth or straighten hair.

Oregon OSHA’s testing of more than 100 product samples from more than 50 Oregon salons confirmed earlier test results that showed significant levels of formaldehyde in products labeled “formaldehyde free.” Oregon OSHA also monitored the air in several salons to assess the effect on workers.

“Although it’s not clear whether the regulatory level of airborne exposure would be exceeded based on our results, it is clear that the levels are high enough to cause concern,” said Michael Wood, Oregon OSHA administrator. “And it is certainly clear that the amount of formaldehyde in many of these products is high enough to trigger the requirements of OSHA’s formaldehyde rules.”

Using an analysis of the issues produced in conjunction with the Center for Research in Occupational and Environmental Toxicology at Oregon Health & Science University, Oregon OSHA will share its testing results with several other agencies working on this issue, such as the Oregon Department of Justice, Oregon Public Health, and the Oregon Health Licensing Agency. The goal of the cooperative effort is to ensure workers and consumers are protected and have correct information about the ingredients in these products.

In the meantime, Oregon OSHA is advising salons that use hair-smoothing treatments, particularly those referred to as “Keratin-based,” to take necessary precautions outlined in Oregon OSHA’s formaldehyde rule. According to the rule, employers using products containing formaldehyde must provide information and training to workers and they must conduct air monitoring to ensure workers are not exposed to levels above the permissible limit. Providing personal protective equipment such as gloves or goggles and having an emergency eyewash station can help lower exposure levels. The hazard alert contains more information and guidance, available at <http://www.orosha.org/pdf/hazards/2993-26.pdf>. The Oregon Health Licensing Agency (OHLA) will electronically distribute the alert to salons and stylists.

Test results

Of the product samples tested by Oregon OSHA, 37 came from bottles of Brazilian Blowout Acai Professional Smoothing Solution, labeled “formaldehyde free.” The formaldehyde content in that product averaged 8.68 percent. Under the OSHA formaldehyde standard (CFR 1910.1048), solutions with a formaldehyde content of more than 0.1 percent must list formaldehyde as an ingredient. Formaldehyde in solution is also referred to as formalin, aqueous formaldehyde, or methylene glycol. Several other brands of hair straighteners were also found to contain more than 0.1 percent formaldehyde.

“It’s true that we encounter formaldehyde in smaller amounts every day. But some of these hair-smoothing products have more formaldehyde in them than the formalin used to preserve laboratory specimens,” said Wood.

Oregon OSHA also conducted air monitoring during treatments using the Brazilian Blowout smoothing product at five different salons where a single treatment was conducted over the course of the day. Averaging over an eight-hour period, worker exposures ranged from 0.006 parts per million (ppm) to 0.331 ppm. These compare to a permissible exposure limit of 0.75 ppm. Although the limit was not exceeded for any of these stylists, multiple treatments would increase the daily average significantly.

During its air monitoring, Oregon OSHA also found short-term exposures ranging from a high of 0.108 ppm for one stylist to a high of 1.88 ppm for another. These compare to a short-term exposure limit of 2.0 ppm. Although it was not exceeded, the highest short-term exposure represents 94 percent of the short-term limit.

Oregon OSHA notes that the recommended exposure limits of both the American Conference of Government Industrial Hygienists (ACGIH) and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) are much more protective than the regulatory levels adopted by OSHA. Almost all the sample results in these cases exceeded both the ACGIH and NIOSH recommended levels.

For more details of these sampling results go to http://www.orosha.org/pdf/Final_Hair_Smoothing_Report.pdf.

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Oregon OSHA, a division of the Department of Consumer and Business Services, enforces the state’s workplace safety and health rules and works to improve workplace safety and health for all Oregon workers. The Department of Consumer and Business Services is Oregon’s largest business regulatory and consumer protection agency. For more information, visit www.orosha.org.