

HEALTH

\$417 Million Awarded in Suit Tying Johnson's Baby Powder to Cancer

By RONI CARYN RABIN AUG. 22, 2017

In what may be the largest award so far in a lawsuit tying ovarian cancer to talcum powder, a Los Angeles jury on Monday ordered Johnson & Johnson to pay \$417 million in damages to a medical receptionist who developed ovarian cancer after using the company's trademark Johnson's Baby Powder on her perineum for decades.

Eva Echeverria, 63, of East Los Angeles is one of thousands of women who have sued the consumer products giant Johnson & Johnson claiming baby powder caused their disease, pointing to studies linking talc to cancer that date to 1971, when scientists in Wales discovered particles of talc embedded in ovarian and cervical tumors.

Only a few lawsuits have gone to trial, but so far most of the decisions have gone against the company. In May, a Missouri jury awarded \$110 million to a Virginia woman, a year after Missouri juries awarded \$55 million to one plaintiff and \$72 million to a woman who died before the verdict. Another woman, Deane Berg of Sioux Falls, S.D., won a lawsuit, but the jury did not award damages.

In March, a St. Louis jury rejected a Tennessee woman's claim that Johnson & Johnson's powder caused her ovarian cancer, and a New Jersey judge dismissed two talcum powder lawsuits against the company, a company spokesman said.

Many women sprinkle baby powder on their inner thighs to prevent chafing, or use it on their perineum, sanitary pads or underwear for its drying and freshening effects.

Ms. Echeverria, who was too sick to testify in court and gave a videotaped deposition, started using Johnson's Baby Powder when she was 11 and continued after being diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2007, unaware that some studies had linked talc to cancer, said her lawyer, Mark Robinson. She stopped using it after hearing news reports of a verdict in another lawsuit against Johnson & Johnson, he said, and now wanted to warn other women.

"She told me, 'I'm not doing this for myself,'" Mr. Robinson said. "She knows she's going to die. She's doing this for other women. She wants to do something good before she leaves."

A spokeswoman for Johnson & Johnson, Carol Goodrich, said the company would appeal the verdict handed up by a jury in the Superior Court of Los Angeles County and was preparing for additional trials. The company "will continue to defend the safety of Johnson's Baby Powder," she said.

"Ovarian cancer is a devastating diagnosis and we deeply sympathize with the women and families impacted by this disease," Ms. Goodrich said in a statement. But she added, "We will appeal today's verdict because we are guided by the science, which supports the safety of Johnson's Baby Powder."

The company statement pointed to a National Cancer Institute report in April that said, "The weight of evidence does not support an association between perineal talc exposure and an increased risk of ovarian cancer."

But elsewhere, the cancer institute uses more ambivalent language, saying "it is not clear" if talcum powder increases the risk of ovarian cancer.

Though numerous studies have linked genital talc use to ovarian cancer, the research findings have not been consistent. They consist mostly of epidemiological or population studies, which cannot conclusively prove a cause-and-effect relationship between an exposure and later development of cancer.

But scientists have hypothesized that talc might lead to cancer because the crystals can move up the genitourinary tract into the peritoneal cavity, where the ovaries are, and may set off inflammation, which is believed to play an important role in the development of ovarian cancer.

powder as a possible human carcinogen if used in the female genital area, but no federal agencies have acted to remove talcum powder from the market or add warnings.

Talc is a naturally occurring clay mineral composed of magnesium and silicon that is mined in proximity to asbestos, a known carcinogen, and the Food and Drug Administration asks manufacturers to take steps to avoid contamination with asbestos.

Talc is used in many cosmetics products, including one formula of Johnson's Baby Powder; another formula uses cornstarch, which has not been implicated in any studies or lawsuits about ovarian cancer.

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