Northern California Cancer Center Releases Preliminary Survey Of Vietnamese Nail Salon Workers in Alameda County

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Repeated and prolonged exposure to variety of chemicals could put workers at risk. Survey participants note medical problems and report being “concerned about their health.”

May 19, 2008 – Fremont, CA: They pamper us and make us feel special. They work long hours for low wages and English is usually their second language, if then. They are mainly Vietnamese women who make their living giving manicures and pedicures. They also suffer from acute health effects associated with the chemicals they use in that work, according to a new survey from the Northern California Cancer Center and Asian Health Services of Oakland. This is one of the first such surveys to focus on this understudied workforce. “Nail care workers routinely handle products containing many potentially harmful compounds, some of which are carcinogens or have endocrine disrupting effects, yet are virtually unregulated,” explained Thu Quach, MPH of the Northern California Cancer Center. “Our survey is part of a pilot project designed to characterize Vietnamese nail salon workers in Alameda County, California in order to inform future health interventions and reduce occupational exposures. Nail salon workers are likely to have higher exposures to these compounds than the customers they serve.”
Many toxic and potentially hazardous ingredients, including solvents, plasticizers, resins and acids, are commonly found in nail care products. The nail salon industry is recognized as one of the fastest growing in the United States. Of California’s more than 35,000 salons, the vast majority are owned or operated by Vietnamese women.

“A majority of the workers reported health concerns from exposures to workplace chemicals,” reports Dung Nguyen of Asian Health Services who directed the face-to-face interviews with 201 Vietnamese nail salon workers at 74 salons. “Many of them reported having some health problem after they began working in the industry, particularly skin and eye irritation, breathing difficulties and headaches.” according to Nguyen.

“Our findings highlight a critical need for further investigation into the breast cancer risk of nail salon workers, underscored by the workers’ routine use of carcinogenic and endocrine-disrupting chemicals, their prevalent health concerns about such chemicals, and their high level of acute health problems,” adds Quach, “Moreover, the predominance of Vietnamese immigrant women in this workforce makes it an important target group for further research and health interventions.” The NCCC/AHS partnership has recently been funded by California’s Breast Cancer Research Program to further investigate these concerns.

A Preliminary Survey of Vietnamese Nail Salon Workers in Alameda County, California was published on May 14th electronically on SpringerLink (www.springerlink.com) and is scheduled to appear in the October print issue of Journal of Community Health. The full PDF version of the article is available at http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10900-008-9107-7.

About the Northern California Cancer Center:
The Northern California Cancer Center (www.nccc.org) is a nationally recognized leader in understanding the causes and prevention of cancer and in improving the quality of life for individuals living with cancer. The organization has been working with scientists, educators, patients, clinicians, and community leaders since 1974. NCCC is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit with 150 employees and a $15 million operating budget.

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