

Pharmaceutical giant Johnson and Johnson knowingly selling carcinogenic talcum powder prompts UK's biggest class action

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30 October 2025

For decades, pharmaceutical giant Johnson and Johnson sold its popular talcum powder in the US, Canada, the UK, India and globally as an antidote to skin irritation or nappy rash after bathing.

Johnson's baby powder, with its distinctive aroma redolent of cleanliness and purity, was used by adults as well as children. Mothers sprinkled it liberally on their babies, not knowing that the cloud of white dust could harbour a deadly carcinogen.

Johnson and Johnson (J&J) knew this but sought to cover up the fact that their product was contaminated with asbestos and was allegedly killing its customers, declare the claimants in the legal case.

Three thousand people in the UK are now taking a class action against the multinational on the grounds that they knowingly sold tainted baby powder, which they charge was responsible for either their own cancers or that of relatives. It is the biggest action of its kind in British legal history.

The legal suit in the UK mirrors that pursued against the company in the US, where juries have awarded plaintiffs billions of dollars in compensation. One claimant with terminal mesothelioma in Connecticut was recently awarded \$25 million, though this is under appeal.

The UK claim rests on internal company documents and scientific reports, brought by KP Law against J&J and its subsidiary Kenvue Ltd. The companies are denying the claim. However, during court proceedings internal documents were presented revealing that J&J were aware since the 1960s that their product contained asbestos fibres and took measures to conceal this.

Talc or talcum is composed of hydrated magnesium silicate, mined in many countries including Brazil, India, China, the US, France, South Korea and Finland. It is used in cosmetic products like lipsticks, eyeshadow and face make-up. It is also used extensively in industry in the production of plant food, paint, cement and disinfectants.

The problem with this mineral is that it is frequently found

in the same location as asbestos, also used widely in industrial products, and in building materials for its fire-retardant properties. Asbestos is a scientifically proven carcinogen when its tiny needle-like fibres are inhaled, leading to fatal mesothelioma or lung cancer as well as asbestosis.

A 1973 internal memorandum admitted the occasional presence of small amounts of actinolite or tremolite (types of asbestos) in the mineral talc, which was the main ingredient of J&J's baby powder. It states, "Our baby powder contains talc fragments classifiable as fibre. Occasionally sub-trace quantities of tremolite or actinolite are identifiable (optical microscope) and these might be classified as asbestos fibre."

Company officials toyed with the idea of patenting a technique to remove asbestos from talcum powder but decided otherwise as this would expose their knowledge that talc was contaminated with asbestos fibres. One executive stated, "We may wish to keep the whole thing confidential rather than allow it to be published in patent form and thus let the whole world know."

The *BBC* reported that they spoke to J&J subsidiary Kenvue—formerly its Consumer Healthcare division. A Kenvue spokesperson explained that they were unable to find a method to decontaminate the talc. There followed decades of coverup at the expense of the health of talcum powder users.

Rather than alerting the relevant government bodies and withdrawing the product, J&J embarked on an aggressive marketing campaign to increase sales in the 1970s and 1980s, emphasising its purity and gentleness, even for newborn babies.

The product was not withdrawn until 2020 in the US and Canada and 2023 worldwide. J&J still sell baby powder, using a cornstarch substitute for talc.

Many claimants in the UK link their diagnoses of mesothelioma, lung cancer, ovarian cancer and other malignancies with prolonged use of Johnson's baby powder.

Siobhan Ryan, 63, told the BBC, “My mother used it, and I used it. It smelt nice and was soft and lovely. When my babies were born, I used it on them. I thought I was doing my best for them.” Siobhan was diagnosed with stage 4 ovarian cancer, which after endless rounds of treatment was declared inoperable.

Also cited in the UK legal claim are documents showing that from the 1970s J&J lobbied the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to accept a less stringent test for the existence of asbestos fibres of 1 percent contamination. It seems the FDA accepted their assertion that a more sensitive test was unnecessary.

A former J&J toxicology director Dr. Steve Mann admitted in a deposition testimony to court that he made assertions as to the safety of the product without examining test data and failed to report asbestos findings in positive test results he did receive.

The number of those affected by the prolonged use of J&J’s baby powder probably far exceeds the number of claimants in the current litigation. Scientific studies have yet to establish how many. An unknown number of workers who mined the talc would have also succumbed to the deadly effects of asbestos.

Studies show that talc miners have a higher incidence of asbestos related diseases than the general public. In New York, for example, the incidence of mesothelioma in talc miners is five times the rate in the surrounding population.

J&J have piled up the profits at the expense of the misery and suffering of its customers. For 2024, earnings were reported at \$14.07 billion, with revenue of \$88.82 for the year. According to Forbes, profits for 2025 have reached \$21.8 billion. It comes in at number 45 in the ranking of largest US companies on the 2024 Fortune 500 list.

The US-based company was founded in 1886, and mass production of the talcum powder began soon after. It expanded into a pharmaceutical, biotechnology and medical technologies corporation, with a global workforce today of 138,000.

J&J has faced many lawsuits, relating to hip replacement failures, the opioid crisis and transvaginal mesh. It tried to hide the existence of asbestos in its baby powder because the carcinogenic nature of asbestos had been irrefutably proved and is generally known about. Yet next to nothing is being done to rid this substance from the wider environment.

Though banned in the UK in 1999, asbestos remains in situ and as buildings deteriorate thousands in schools, hospitals and other public buildings are exposed to its invisible but deadly fibres. Governments, Conservative and Labour, have ignored the need to implement a removal plan at an estimated cost of £11.6 billion.

According to the Airtight On Asbestos Campaign, the

number of annual asbestos related deaths amounts to 20,412, charging that the government Health and Safety Executive (HSE) vastly underestimate the figure, putting it at 5,000 deaths a year. For example, the HSE does not record the deaths associated with asbestos of those over the age of 75.

Asbestos related diseases have a long incubation period, between 15-40 years. An article in the *Guardian* by freelance journalist Tom White explains that Helen Bone was diagnosed with mesothelioma three years ago. She could have contracted the disease while at school, or college, or the two hospitals where she was employed. White notes her comment to the *Northern Echo* in 2022, that “You always think of asbestos as a disease from decades ago—affecting men who worked in heavy industry—so to be diagnosed in my 30s is shocking.”

Helen died last November aged just 38.

The Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012, following a European Commission decision, favours in situ management rather than removal. This policy has been disastrous. White cites the report of the National Organisation of Asbestos Consultants and the Asbestos Testing and Consultancy Association that found in a recent audit of 128,761 buildings that “78 percent had asbestos... 71 percent of the asbestos items were damaged... 30 percent were in the highest risk category.”

The policy of the trade unions is for the complete removal of asbestos, but they have done nothing to mobilize their members to achieve this beyond appeals to successive governments that are dedicated to defending the wealth of the rich.

To put an end to these preventable deaths, workers must take responsibility for their own health and safety, building rank-and-file committees—Independent of the union bureaucracy—in workplaces and communities. This must be combined with a struggle to take big pharma out of the hands of the profiteers, to be owned and controlled by the working class under socialism.



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