

## Nail salon workers exposed to toxic chemicals, experts say in S.F.

Elizabeth Fernandez, Chronicle Staff Writer

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During the 13 years that Connie Nguyen has worked in Bay Area nail salons, she's seen numerous friends and co-workers become ill. She, too, has come down with mysterious skin rashes and respiratory problems. A few years ago, experiencing shortness of breath, she went to the doctor.

"The X-ray technician asked me if I'd been smoking a long time," said Nguyen, 48. "It shocked me. I have never smoked in my life."

Amid a booming beauty industry, California's legions of nail salon workers - most of them Asian immigrant women - are being exposed to hazardous chemicals in cosmetic products, chemicals that have largely gone unregulated because state law exempts cosmetics and personal care products.

With evidence mounting that prolonged exposure to chemicals is putting these vulnerable workers at risk for a host of health problems, state Sen. Carole Migden held a legislative hearing Thursday in San Francisco to begin assessing perils in salons. Her purpose was to establish what the state can do to protect salon workers.

"Every day, nail salon workers are exposed to a wide array of carcinogenic chemicals," said Migden, a San Francisco Democrat who heads the Senate's Labor and Industrial Relations Committee. She noted that some of the products routinely used in the state's thousands of nail and beauty salons are banned in Europe.

Nail salons garnered headlines in recent years after scores of customers around the state became ill from bacterial infections, many stemming from dirty footbaths after pedicures. A law, authored by then-Assemblyman Leland Yee (D-San Francisco), now a state senator, went into effect last year tightening controls and imposing penalties on salons found to be using unsanitary practices.

But even though the number of nail salons in California has more than tripled during the last two decades, little research has been done on the health effects to the state's salon workers, many of them in childbearing years, from exposure to toxic chemicals.

Various experts testified during the packed 2 1/2-hour hearing at City Hall that salon technicians - many of whom work 10 hours a day, six or seven days a week - were systematically accumulating significant amounts of toxic chemicals.



"It's not just the dose that makes the poison," said Charlotte Brody, a registered nurse and executive director of Commonweal, a nonprofit health and environmental research institute in Bolinas.

"We are now beginning to see chronic asthma, dermatitis and other respiratory illnesses," said Julia Liou, representing Asian Health Services, a community health center serving Alameda County, and the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative. Liou said that a research project is to be started in January by Asian Health Services and the Northern California Cancer Center to study whether salon workers have a higher incidence of breast cancer.

Lam Thi Le, 58, a mother of two who lives in Oakland, testified that in 1992, two years after she began working as a manicurist, she was diagnosed with thyroid problems; a decade later she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She quit, Le said, "after 12 years of sacrificing my health to make a living."

George Alexeef, deputy director of the state's Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, which publishes a list of chemicals known to cause cancer or reproductive toxicity, testified that toluene and formaldehyde - contained in some nail salon products - are among the hundreds of substances identified by his office. He said the two chemicals cause health effects ranging from fatigue and headaches to respiratory irritations and cancer.

"We have more chemicals than we can possibly test or evaluate," said Alexeef, whose office is part of the state Environmental Protection Agency.

Kristy Underwood, executive officer of the state Board of Barbering and Cosmetology, which regulates the salon industry, said there are only 16 inspectors responsible for overseeing the state's 35,000 salons. The state has some 94,000 licensed manicurists.

"It is physically impossible to reach all the salons," she said.

Also testifying was Nhung Pham, 55, who works at Nail Today in Oakland. She is part of an informal group of salon workers brought together by Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice.

"We share stories about our aches and pains, and some have even shared stories about miscarriages," she said.

Many of the workers speak little or no English, impeding "our ability to understand the health and safety inspections and citations process," Pham said.

Migden said she plans to introduce legislation on the matter in the coming year.

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