

Just the Facts...

Home and Traditional Remedies and Lead Poisoning A Fact Sheet for Health Care Professionals

Q: Has lead poisoning occurred as a result of home and herbal remedies, sometimes referred to as folk or traditional medicine?

A: Yes, numerous cases of lead poisoning have occurred from home and herbal remedies, particularly from remedies used by immigrant populations from Latin America, Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and the Middle East. Since these remedies are not considered medicines, the government does not regulate them as pharmaceutical products. Therefore, the ingredients and the effectiveness are not regulated.

Q: What are the symptoms of lead poisoning?

A: Lead poisoning has short term and long-term effects. The short-term effects of lead poisoning include abdominal pain, constipation, headaches, mental difficulties and at high doses, seizures, coma, and death. Exposure to lead over longer periods of time (months to years) can result in anemia, abdominal cramping, nerve problems like weakness or tingling sensations or loss of sensation in the hands and feet, mental difficulties, and most importantly, delayed or limited neurological development in children. It has also been implicated as a contributor to elevated blood pressure and kidney disease.

Q: Are children more susceptible to lead poisoning?

A: Yes, because of their smaller body weight, exposure to lead will have a more pronounced effect in children. And because a child's brain and nerves are still in the development stages, the nervous system is more susceptible to the toxicity of lead.

Q: Should pregnant women have additional concerns about lead?

A: Yes, lead will affect both the mother and the unborn child. The lead will affect the development of the nervous system of the fetus, and inhibit the ability of the baby's body to build blood cells. Breastfeeding women can also transfer lead from the remedies they take through the breast milk to the baby.

Q: Which herbal remedies have been implicated?

A: The lead containing herbal remedies in widest use are greta, azarcon, used in Mexican home remedies, and pay-loo-ah used in traditional remedies in Southeast Asian traditional remedies.

Health authorities have reported lead poisoning from the following herbal/traditional remedies:

Albayade	Bint Dahab	Hauge ge fen	Mahayo
Azarcon	Bokhoor	Jin Bu Huan	Pay-loo-ah
Ayurveda	Gasard	Kohl	Po-ying-tan
Ba-Baw-San	Greta	Koo-sar	Santrin
Bint Al Zahab	Gran guggula	Litargirio	Surma

Q: Are those listed products the only remedy products that are known to contain lead?

A: No, many remedies go by different names; for example, the lead compound in azarcon is also sold as rueda, coral, alarcon, liga, or Maria Luisa. Public health authorities often get new reports of lead poisoning as a result of previously untested traditional remedies.

Q: How much lead can these remedies contain?

A: Lots. For example, lead compounds make up over 90% of azarcon, pay-loo-ah can be as much as 90% lead, and lead is the main ingredient in greta.

Q: How can products with this much lead be allowed to be sold as remedies?

A: Again, herbal and folk remedies are not under the jurisdiction of the Food and Drug Administration, and the government does not have legal authority to regulate these remedies. If a specific remedy is found to be toxic in a specific geographic area, public health officials at the local or state level can attempt to remove it from the market, but because of the variety of sales outlets, manufacturers, packaging and nomenclature for folk remedies, as well as legal issues, this usually proves practically impossible.

Q: How should your patients protect themselves and their children from lead poisoning due to use of these remedies?

A: They should seek professional medical advice from a health care professional (i.e. doctor or pharmacist) before using any herbal, folk, home or traditional remedy. As some of these remedies interact with prescription and non prescription medicines, they should make sure their health care provider is aware of any medicines they are taking. Pregnant and breastfeeding women and young children should be especially careful. For military health care/TRICARE beneficiaries, most TRICARE regions have a health advice line that often can be a valuable first source of medical information.

Q: What should your patients do if they are concerned that someone in their family may be experiencing lead poisoning?

A: They should talk to their primary care provider; blood tests are available to determine if they have a dangerous amount of lead in their blood.

For more information:

www.epa.gov/opptintr/lead

www.hud.gov/offices/lead/outreach

www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead

<http://chppm-www.apgea.army.mil/lahome>

Your local and state health department websites