

Acute Lead Poisoning
Associated with Use of Ayurvedic (Asian Indian Traditional) Medications
United States, 2000-2003

Since 2000, a number of cases of acute lead poisoning associated with use of Ayurvedic medications have occurred among adults in the United States. Ayurveda is a traditional form of medicine practiced in India and other South Asian countries. Ayurvedic medications might contain herbs, minerals, metals, or animal products and are made in standardized and non-standardized formulations. These medications typically are brought into the United States by practitioners and followers of Ayurvedic medicine.

CDC has received reports about 12 cases of lead poisoning from four states related to these medications. Descriptions of these cases follow:

California: In unrelated cases, a man and a woman from India taking Ayurvedic fertility medicines had BLLs of 80 µg/dL and 112 µg/dL, respectively. The woman's BLL was obtained 1 month after discontinuing the medicines. Analyses of the pills used in both cases revealed lead content of 73,900 ppm and 78,000 ppm, respectively. Similar cases are suspected among adults with Asian Indian surnames.

Massachusetts: An Indian immigrant self-treating arthritis and muscle pains with Ayurvedic tablets had a BLL of 89 µg/dL 2 weeks after initial presentation; his wife had a BLL of 60 µg/dL. Analysis of the medication taken by both persons showed it contained 14,000 ppm lead. In addition, a 19-year-old woman from Nepal with anemia and gastrointestinal complaints had a BLL of 46 µg/dL. She had been taking an Ayurvedic medication for menstrual health but had discontinued its use 1 month before being examined by a physician. This medication contained 96,000 ppm lead.

New Hampshire: A woman from India taking five Ayurvedic medications for rheumatoid arthritis presented with a blood lead level (BLL) of 81 µg/dL. Two of these medicines contained 12,000 ppm and 17,000 ppm lead.

New York: Six persons with BLLs ranging from 27 to 105 µg/dL (mean: 73 µg/dL), were taking Ayurvedic medications from India. Four of these persons were taking medications for diabetes prescribed by Ayurvedic practitioners. Five of these persons were from northern India. The lead content of three medications tested ranged from 44,000 to 79,000 ppm.

Many common Ayurvedic medications do not contain lead. However, among those that do contain lead, a broad range of lead content has been reported, ranging from 0.4 to 261,200 ppm (1). In addition, lead is present in some traditional remedies used in Chinese, Middle Eastern, and Hispanic cultures. Episodes of lead poisoning associated with such remedies have been documented in *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Reports* (2-5).

Clinical and public health practitioners should be aware of Ayurvedic medicines as a potential source of lead exposure in persons of South Asian descent and consider blood lead testing in such persons who report use of these medicines. Community organizations that work with South Asian populations also should be informed about this potential risk. In addition, these recommendations apply to other populations that practice traditional or folk medicine.

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References:

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