

Lead poisoning from Ayurvedic medicines purchased overseas

Warning from the Department of Health

- A number of cases of **lead poisoning** have been reported to the Department of Health as a result of taking **Ayurvedic preparations imported from India**.
- Consuming **lead is toxic** to your organs and nervous and reproductive systems.
- Lead is especially toxic for unborn babies and children under five.
- In **adults, symptoms** of lead poisoning include; abdominal pain, confusion, nausea, headache, anaemia, irritability; and in severe cases, seizures, coma, and death.
- Some adults and children **may not experience any obvious symptoms** but may still suffer long-term ill effects.
- Ayurvedic medicines being brought into Australia from other countries are **not subject to Australian standards** designed to protect your health.
- If you are given a preparation by a friend or relative and you cannot identify the origin or ingredients, **it is safer not to take it**.
- Lead poisoning can be treated in most cases. See your doctor if you are concerned.

What is Ayurveda?

Ayurveda or ayurvedic medicine is a system of traditional medicine native to India that uses a range of approaches, including *Rasa shastra*; the practice of adding metals, minerals or gems to herbs for consumption.

Ayurvedic preparations have been known to take the form of pellets, tablets and powders of various colours and scents for a range of applications.

Lead in Ayurvedic medicines

Several cases of lead poisoning due to taking Ayurvedic *Rasa shastra* preparations brought into Australia from India have been reported to the Victorian Department of Health since early 2010.¹

Analysis of the preparations used has revealed lead levels up to 15,000 times that allowed in Australia.²

In some cases people reported taking the preparations to help with fertility issues. In all cases, people suffered ill-health.

Regulation in Australia

The quality and safety of complementary medicines, such as Ayurvedic preparations, **sold in Australia** are regulated by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) to protect public health. The TGA limits lead content to 0.001 per cent in complementary medicines available for sale in Australia.

1 Health Alert - *Lead poisoning from imported Ayurvedic medicine* - 8 August 2011, Chief Health Officer, State Government of Victoria
<<http://www.health.vic.gov.au/chiefhealthofficer/alerts/alert-2011-08-ayurvedic.htm>>

2 Therapeutic Goods Administration, August 2011, *Australian Regulatory Guidelines for Complementary Medicines, Part III: Evaluation of Complementary Medicine Substances, V4.2*, Department of Health & Ageing, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

Affects of lead poisoning

How does lead affect fertility?

Lead is toxic to the reproductive systems of both men and women. It can cause **sperm abnormalities** in men and **miscarriages** in women. Sperm abnormalities can make it harder to conceive a baby. If a baby is conceived, lead exposure can also cause miscarriages.³

Who is most at risk from lead exposure?

Unborn babies are at serious risk. Lead swallowed by the pregnant mother easily passes to the unborn baby and can result in miscarriage or permanent brain damage of the baby.

Babies and children under five years of age are especially vulnerable to the ill-health effects of lead exposure, which can cause permanent brain damage and impair intellectual development. This is because children's developing brains are more sensitive to the effects of lead and their bodies absorb more lead than adults. Breastfeeding mothers can pass lead onto their infants via their breast milk.

What are the symptoms?

Lead poisoning – acute exposure

The symptoms of acute lead poisoning (a high level at one time) include:

abdominal and/or muscle pains	fatigue
vomiting / nausea	headache
coma	seizures

Lead poisoning – chronic exposure

Chronic (long-term or ongoing) exposure to lower levels of lead may produce symptoms such as:

irritability	lack of energy
loss of appetite	poor coordination
anaemia	
In children:	
behavioural problems	poor school performance
learning disabilities	impaired growth

Some children or adults may not have any symptoms; however lead exposure may still cause long term ill-health effects such as blood pressure, kidney and fertility problems.

What should I do if I suspect I have lead poisoning?

If you have experienced lead poisoning symptoms and/or you are concerned you may have been exposed to lead while taking Ayurvedic preparations imported from overseas, **discontinue use and see your doctor**.

Lead poisoning is not common and its symptoms can be easily attributed to other more common illnesses. Most doctors would have limited exposure to the symptoms of lead poisoning.

If you suspect you have lead poisoning consider taking this information sheet with you to your doctor. Lead levels can be detected by a simple blood test. Treatment options vary depending on the level of lead exposure. Your doctor can advise you of the most appropriate treatment.

Avoiding lead poisoning

Before buying or taking a complementary medicine check the label for an 'AUST L' (listed) or 'AUST R' (registered) code. This means they meet Australian safety standards designed to protect your health.

Avoid purchasing or using complementary medicines not registered with the TGA, including those obtained from overseas.

If you are given a preparation by a friend or relative and you cannot identify the origin or ingredients, it is safer not to take it.

Always tell your doctor if you are taking or have taken any complementary medicines.

Further information

See your doctor if you have any health concerns.

Better Health Channel lead poisoning fact sheet:
http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Lead_poisoning

NHMRC Public Statement on blood lead levels for Australians:

http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/files_nhmrc/publications/attachments/gp3-lead-pub-stmnt.pdf

Telephone the Department of Health, Environmental Health Unit on 1300 761 874.

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³ National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), August 2009, *Blood lead levels for Australians: An information paper for practitioners and policy makers*, Australian Government, Canberra.