

Risk of lead exposure from complementary, traditional and herbal medicine

Australia has seen a number of cases of people requiring hospital treatment after ingesting complementary medicine containing lead. It is important to talk to your doctor about any complementary medicine you use and only use medicine bought in Australia that has been assessed by the national Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA).

What is complementary medicine?

The term complementary medicine has a legal definition set by the TGA and a more general meaning. Typically, it means any medicine that is not part of conventional treatment, which is used for maintaining good health, as well as treatment of illnesses. Complementary medicine includes herbal medicines, vitamin and mineral supplements, homeopathic products, aromatherapy and traditional medicines. Complementary medicines are used by many cultures around the world such as Ayurvedic medicine, which is native to India, and Chinese, Burmese, Native American and African Traditional Medicines.

What is lead and how can it affect my health?

Lead is a metal used widely in industries and has previously been used in petrol and paint. The most common use today is in vehicle batteries, however lead can be found in some complementary medicine imported from overseas.

There is no safe level of lead exposure. Lead can be harmful to your health and is not needed for any normal body function. At low levels, the symptoms are subtle and cannot usually be measured in an individual. High levels can cause severe damage to your brain and kidneys, and even death.

Symptoms of lead exposure can include:

- increased blood pressure
- weakness in fingers, wrists, ankles and muscles
- headaches
- tiredness
- anaemia
- abdominal pain
- lack of appetite
- seizures.

Unborn babies, infants and children are most vulnerable to harm from lead. In pregnant women, high levels of lead exposure may cause low weight babies or miscarriage. In men, lead can damage reproductive organs. Exposure to low levels over a long time can cause behavioural and learning problems in children. There is also a risk that populations exposed to lead will have lower average IQ. People with diabetes have a higher risk of damage to kidney function from lead exposure.

How can lead be present in complementary medicine?

Some complementary medicines may accidentally contain lead from contamination during the manufacturing and packaging process or contamination of the ingredients (e.g. plants may have been grown in a contaminated environment). Lead may sometimes be added intentionally to complementary medicine because it is believed to have beneficial effects or even to increase the weight of a product.

How do I know if a complementary medicine contains lead?

In Australia, lead has been found by laboratory testing in some complementary medicine imported from overseas or bought over the internet. Always check the label to see if lead is listed as an ingredient. The TGA regulates most complementary medicine supplied in Australia. Complementary medicine bought from overseas (even if it is provided by a relative or a friend), imported into Australia for personal use, or bought online (especially from overseas websites) are not regulated by the TGA and have a higher risk of being contaminated with lead.

How can I reduce the risk of lead poisoning from complementary medicine?

- Check the label on complementary medicine for a AUST L number, AUST R number or AUST L(A) number to show that it is regulated by the TGA.
- Check if your traditional or natural medicine practitioner is registered with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) or accredited through a national association.
- Avoid using complementary medicine that has lead listed as an ingredient.
- Even if you have used a particular complementary medicine before, be cautious if you are buying the same product of a different brand or from a different manufacturer.
- Avoid giving complementary medicine to children and pregnant women, especially if you are not sure where it was manufactured.
- Talk to your doctor about any complementary medicine you are taking and before you start taking any complementary medicine that you haven't used before.

Where to get help?

- If you have received this fact sheet as a result of a blood test, if you have not already done so, you should talk to your family doctor.
- Call the Poisons Information Centre on 13 11 26 (24 hours a day) if you suspect poisoning
- Contact the Metro North Public Health Unit on 3624 1111 or send an email to EH_BrisbaneNorth@health.qld.gov.au.

This fact sheet has been adapted from the South Australia Health document, ['Risk of lead exposure from complementary, traditional and herbal medicine'](#).