

# Environmental Health Coalition



## Childhood Lead Poisoning – Health Impacts Summary Sheet

### What is Lead?

Lead is a heavy metal used in many materials and products. When absorbed into the body, it is highly toxic to many organs and systems such as the nervous system and kidneys. It also seriously hinders the body's neurological development. Lead is a natural element and does not break down in the environment. Even very tiny amounts of lead are hazardous to children under the age of six.

### What are the health impacts associated with childhood lead poisoning?

Childhood lead poisoning is still the number one environmental health threat to children under the age of six. The good news is that it is entirely preventable. Children with lead poisoning are usually asymptomatic. Symptoms that do occur are subtle such as flu-like symptoms. Most children are poisoned through chronic, low-level exposures which can cause many developmental problems including reduced IQ, hyperactivity, impaired growth, learning disabilities, and behavior problems. The CDC defines childhood lead poisoning at 10 micrograms per deciliter or above. However, recent studies found that levels below 10 micrograms per deciliter are causing a drop of up to 7.4 IQ points. Moreover, recent research suggests that certain children exposed to lead are more likely to develop attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). There is no treatment for lead poisoning, the damage done is permanent. Therefore, the only solution is to eliminate the sources of lead from the child's environment.

### Where is the lead found in chile and tamarind-based candy products?

Although the major source of childhood lead poisoning is lead-based paint and dust, numerous chile and tamarind-based candy imported and sold in California are contaminated with lead and present a serious and substantial threat to children's health.

More than 100 brands of candy sold in California, most of them from Mexico, have tested positive for dangerous levels of lead in the past decade. Children are lead poisoned by eating the candy and also by handling the wrapper. Lead is deposited onto children's hands while handling the product. Due to their frequent hand to mouth behavior, children may become poisoned. Also, the tamarind candy is acidic which makes the lead from the wrapper leach into the product.

## How serious is the problem of childhood lead poisoning due to lead in candy?

Fifteen percent of the children found with lead poisoning throughout the State of California in 2002 were linked to lead in candy as the source according to an audit conducted by the Center for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC). Unfortunately, most children do not get tested for lead. Therefore, we suspect that this number to be significantly larger. Unfortunately, many children can be lead poisoned without ever knowing.

In San Diego, over 100 cases of children above 5 micrograms per deciliter are identified per month. Most of the cases are categorized as “multiple sources” where the lead in candy may be one of the contributing sources.

## What are the key provisions of the recently passed California law (AB 121) to protect children from lead in candy products?

- Provides CalEPA Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment and the Department of Health Services authority to establish a health-based standard for lead in candy.
- Provides clear authority to the Department of Health Services to test, ban and remove chile and tamarind-based candy products contaminated with lead.
- Prohibits the sale of chile and tamarind-based candy products contaminated with lead.
- Proactively tests chile and tamarind-based candy products.
- Requires issuance of health advisories when lead has been found in chile and tamarind-based candy products to warn parents, health departments, school districts and candy store owners/distributors.

Environmental Health Coalition is a private nonprofit organization founded in 1980. It is dedicated to the prevention and cleanup of toxic pollution threatening the health and the environment of the San Diego/Tijuana region.

### For more information, please contact:

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