

Investigation of Lead Poisonings from Imported Products-Connecticut

The Challenge

In 2008, the Connecticut Adult Blood Lead Epidemiology and Surveillance (CT ABLES) program responded to a report of elevated blood lead levels (BLLs) in a family who were using spices and colorings purchased from a local Asian-themed grocery market. This sentinel case represented the first time an entire family was identified in our surveillance system where imported products from India were implicated as a potential source of lead poisoning. The affected family experienced symptoms consistent with lead poisoning, and subsequent laboratory tests confirmed BLLs in excess of 100 µg/dl in one family member. Each year we continue to identify new residents with elevated BLLs where the source of exposure is imported products (cookware, spices, colorings, cosmetics, and most recently, non-traditional medications). Continuing challenges to the CT ABLES program include identifying where lead-contaminated products are entering the consumer chain, characterizing the individuals and families using these products, and working with partners to communicate in a culturally responsive way the dangers associated with these products to encourage discontinued use while identifying safer alternatives.

The Response

The CT ABLES and CT Childhood Lead Program coordinate to investigate cases of lead exposure where imported products were the most likely source. Cases often include multiple generations of a family living in one household, many of whom are children. When these cases were found, we actively worked with local health departments to quickly identify the source of lead and remove it from the household. We explored additional ways to identify residents at risk and quickly respond to reports of lead exposure with a potential source of imported products. To get a better understanding of the burden of lead and other heavy metals in imported products, we submitted 17 samples of various cosmetic powders purchased from an online shop for metals analysis and several samples tested positive for lead.

The Impact

This sentinel case marked a change in the way the CT ABLES Program approaches adult lead poisoning investigations and led to expanded program capacity to intervene beyond the worksite. Since 2008, we have had cases that required expanded collaboration and effort. In 2019, these data and findings were presented at the Northeast Occupational Health Network Conference to foster a greater awareness of the emergence of these products and the hazards associated with them among our partners. We also continue to collaborate with our Childhood Lead Program to identify children who also may be exposed to the same products that have resulted in elevated BLLs in adults in the same household. These investigations have offered us the opportunity to assist local health departments with large Indian American populations with educating families on the potential lead exposure risks associated with imported products. They have also provided outreach to Asian-themed grocery store owners regarding the health risks to their customers of importing and selling these products.

For more information about the CT ABLES educational campaign, please visit our website: <http://www.ct.gov/dph/occupationalhealth>