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Contact: Jan Williams, Environmental Health Specialist, 457-8583
Gayle Shirley, Communications Manager, 406-457-8908

**Toxic Lead Can Lurk in Food, Other Unexpected Places**

By Jan Williams
Lewis and Clark Public Health

I’ve spent the past 18 years working in East Helena to reduce the health impacts of lead left in the soil by the former Asarco lead smelter. Recently, we got to celebrate our success. The EPA removed the site from its Superfund list – a sign that we now have the right controls in place to protect public health.

Unfortunately, that doesn’t mean we can all stop worrying about lead in our environment.

Lead occurs naturally in small amounts in the earth’s crust. Like other heavy metals, it doesn’t biodegrade or disappear from the environment over time. Lead also can be found in many products, like leaded gasoline, lead-based paint, ceramics, plumbing materials, batteries, ammunition, and cosmetics.

While lead does have beneficial uses, it can be toxic to people and animals. It can harm almost every organ and system in the body. Children 6 and younger are at the greatest risk because their growing bodies absorb more lead than adults’ bodies do and their brains and nervous systems are more sensitive. A simple blood test can detect lead exposure.

**A Treat Not So Sweet**

Recently, I was reminded about the importance of staying vigilant when it comes to ferreting out lead. A young mother whose child had a high blood-lead level contacted me for advice. I asked whether there might be lead-based paint in her home and whether they had any hobbies that involved lead. I struck out on both counts.

Finally, I asked the mother how she thought her child might have been exposed to lead. Her response surprised me: Mexican candy. The family had taken a vacation to a border town, and her child had eaten some of the sweets.
I had heard of the potential for lead in Mexican candy, but I always thought it was an urban myth. So I decided to do some research.

The first thing I learned was that Mexico has no regulations on the ingredients used to make candy. As a result:

- Some manufacturers add salt that contains lead.
- Some candy is coated with chili powder made from chilies that are contaminated with lead pesticides.
- Candy wrappers sometimes contain lead, which can leach onto the candy.

What I took away from all this was that regulation and oversight for food production and packaging are vitally important. In the United States, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is the oversight agency that monitors and regulates levels of lead in certain foods, tableware, dietary supplements, and cosmetics.

**Lead in the Food Supply**

Lead can enter our food supply in many ways:

- Lead in soil can contaminate fruits and vegetables. Food processing steps like washing may not remove the lead completely.
- Animals can eat plants or drink water contaminated with lead. When we eat those animals, the lead can pass into our own bodies.
- Lead can get into food accidentally through manufacturing processes. For example, plumbing that contains lead can contaminate water used in food production.
- Lead can get into food or drinks prepared, served, or stored in pottery or other containers that contain lead.

Although lead levels in the U.S. food supply have decreased dramatically since the 1970s, low levels are still found in some foods due to the continued presence of lead in the environment.

It’s not possible to remove or completely prevent lead from entering the food supply, but the FDA works to limit consumer exposure as much as possible. As part of that effort, the agency in 2017 created a Toxic Elements Working Group, in part to re-evaluate when the FDA should take action on levels of lead in particular foods.

**What You Can Do**

Protecting ourselves and our children from exposure to lead should be a number one priority for all of us. Here are some steps you can take to minimize exposure:

- Always wash your hands and make sure children wash theirs with uncontaminated water before eating.
• Do not use imported pottery or leaded crystal to store or serve food.
• If you have lead plumbing, use an NSF-certified filter on your faucet for drinking water, food preparation, and cooking. Be sure to change the filter cartridge as instructed on the package. Boiling water will not reduce the presence of lead.
• Regularly clean toys, pacifiers, floors, windowsills, and other surfaces using liquid cleaners that control dust.
• Wipe or remove shoes before entering your home.
• Get your home tested for lead if it was built before 1978, when lead paint was banned.

For more information about lead, contact me at the Lead Education and Assistance Program, 457-8583 or jwilliams@lccountymt.gov.

Jan Williams is an environmental health specialist with Lewis and Clark Public Health. She specializes in the health effects of lead and its removal and mitigation.