

LEAD-CONTAMINATED OPIUM ALERT

Information for General Practitioners, Drug and Alcohol Clinicians and
Emergency Departments

Please distribute to all relevant doctors, nurses and staff in your practice or department

- 1. NSW Health recommends blood lead level screening for any patient suspected of ingesting or inhaling illicit opium products at any point since early 2016**
- 2. There have been cases of severe lead poisoning in NSW and Victoria believed to result from the use of illicit opium products contaminated with lead**
- 3. Lead poisoning can be difficult to diagnose, and should be considered in patients that have abdominal pain, constipation and anaemia of unexplained origin**

Background

There have been a small number of case reports of significant lead blood levels in excess of 100µg/dL in New South Wales and Victoria that are believed to be a result of lead-contaminated opium products. Opium is a dried material extracted from the opium poppy but unlike other products has not undergone further chemical processing and refinement.

These cases have all occurred in people of Iranian background, and it is likely the product has been imported from the Islamic Republic of Iran where there has been an outbreak of lead poisoning from opium since early 2016.

Symptoms of lead poisoning

Presenting symptoms for elevated blood levels can be non-specific and vary depending on length of exposure, patient age and comorbidities. They may easily be misdiagnosed.

The main symptoms or signs to be aware of are abdominal pain, constipation and anaemia. Significantly elevated blood lead levels can cause long-term organ damage or be fatal.

NSW Health screening recommendations

Blood lead level testing should be recommended for any patient suspected of using illicit opium products at any point since early 2016. Testing should be offered regardless of whether they recently used the product or not, as chronic exposure to lead can cause accumulation in bones and interstitial tissue.

Clinical management of elevated blood lead levels

The NSW Poisons Information Centre can provide advice on management of elevated blood lead levels. They are available 24 hours on **13 11 26**.

Public Health Response

Blood lead levels above 5µg/dL must be notified to your local Public Health Unit who can be contacted on **1300 066 055**.

Yours sincerely



Dr Ben Scalley
Director, Environmental Health Branch

23 July 2018