



South Asians and Lead Poisoning

Lead is a poisonous metal that can harm you. New York City's South Asian community is especially at risk for lead poisoning. While lead paint causes most cases of lead poisoning in children, other things can also contain lead, including certain South Asian cosmetics, religious powders, spices, health remedies and amulets. *Often, you cannot tell whether these products contain lead because lead may not be listed on the product packaging.*

Lead is dangerous and can cause:

- Learning and behavior problems in children
- Increased blood pressure and kidney and neurological problems in adults
- Increased risk of miscarriage during pregnancy
- Infertility and impotence

Lead can enter your body when you:

- Eat, swallow or mouth a lead-containing product, such as spices, health remedies and amulets
- Put your hands in your mouth after touching products that contain lead (e.g., cosmetics and religious powders) or surfaces covered in lead dust (e.g., windowsills and floors)
- Breathe in lead dust or fumes during renovations, repairs and demolitions that disturb lead-based paint

Take steps to protect yourself and your family from lead poisoning.

Cosmetics and religious powders

Certain cosmetics and religious powders from South Asia can contain lead. Examples include kohl, kajal



and surma (products primarily used as eyeliner but also for religious, cultural and medicinal purposes), and sindoor (a religious powder used in Hinduism). Lead can enter your body if you touch your mouth after

handling these products. Children are especially at risk because they often put their hands in their mouths. Also, some lead can get into your eyes when using kohl, kajal and surma.

Reduce your risk of lead exposure:

- Wash your hands thoroughly after handling cosmetics and religious powders such as kohl, kajal, surma or sindoor.
- Keep cosmetics and religious powders away from children.
- If you or your family members use these products, ask your doctor for a blood lead test.



Spices

Spices bought in South Asian countries, especially turmeric and chili powders, can contain lead. You can be exposed to lead when you eat foods prepared with these spices.

Reduce your risk of lead exposure:

- Avoid using spices bought in South Asian countries. Buy spices locally instead.
- If you or your family members use spices purchased abroad, ask your doctor for a blood lead test.

Health remedies

Some health remedies from South Asia, such as rasa shastra Ayurvedic medicines, can contain lead and other harmful metals. People may buy these products with a prescription or over the counter in the United States or abroad.

Reduce your risk of lead exposure:

- Avoid using health remedies known to contain lead and other harmful metals.
- If you or your family members are using traditional health remedies, ask your doctor for a blood lead test.



Lead in paint

Although New York City banned lead paint in 1960, older homes may still have lead paint on walls and other surfaces. Lead dust from damaged or peeling paint can land on windowsills, floors and toys. When children play on the floor and put their hands and toys in their mouths, they can swallow the lead dust.



Reduce the risk of lead exposure *in children*:

- Report peeling paint to your landlord. Call 311 if your landlord does not fix the problem.
- Keep children away from repair work. If repairs create a lot of dust, call 311 to report unsafe work.
- Wash floors, windowsills, children's hands and toys often.
- Remind your doctor to give your child a blood lead test at ages 1 and 2, as required by law. Ask your doctor about testing older children too.

Lead in paint also poses a risk to construction workers. During renovations, repairs and demolitions that disturb old lead paint, workers may swallow lead dust and breathe in lead dust and fumes.

Reduce the risk of lead exposure *if you work in construction:*

- Do not eat, drink or smoke in work areas.
- Wash your hands and face with soap and water before eating, drinking or smoking.
- Wear protective clothing and a proper respirator.
- Use safe work practices and wet cleaning methods to reduce dust exposure.
- Change out of your work clothes and shoes before going home or getting in your car.
- Get a blood lead test regularly, and get your family tested too.



Amulets

Amulets (e.g., sheesha, tabiz and other metal charms), which people may use for various reasons (e.g., speech therapy, good luck or protection), can contain high levels of lead. When an amulet is put in the mouth, lead can enter the body. Young children are especially at risk because they often put objects in their mouth.



Reduce your risk of lead exposure:

- Keep amulets away from children whenever possible.
- If your child wears an amulet, place it in a way so that it cannot be mouthed.
- If your child wears an amulet and puts it in their mouth, ask your child's doctor for a blood lead test.

Children and adults with lead poisoning may not look or feel sick. If you think you or your family members are at risk for lead poisoning, ask your doctor for a blood lead test. For help with finding a doctor, call 311.

Visit **nyc.gov/lead** to find out more about these and other lead hazards.