

Kohl, Kajal, Surma Can Cause Brain Damage in Kids

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Using kohl, kajal and surma on the eyes of young children may cause brain damage, warns the Alameda County Lead Poisoning Prevention Program in California.

Even low-level exposure to lead can cause behavioral problems in children, said the ACLPPP in a new initiative designed to warn South Asian Americans about lead exposure through such traditional eyeliners.

Lead is a toxic metal that damages the brain, nervous system and kidneys, and can lead to learning and behavior problems in young children, as well as anemia. Children are at special risk because they may put hands in their mouths after touching their eyes. Inhalation and ingestion are the most common ways for children to be exposed to lead.

Kohl, kajal and surma are often applied to the eyes of infants and young children as a coolant and from local beliefs that they protect the eyesight and vision. Babies and children also occasionally get dots on the forehead, the nape of the neck, or under the ear to ward off the "evil eye."

"Lead poisoning affects the body over time," Julie Kurko, health services manager at the ACLPPP, told *India-West*. "The symptoms aren't obvious when the exposure occurs," said Kurko, who is also a



Many Indian mothers line their young children's eyes with kohl, kajal or surma to ward off evil spirits. Commercial preparations of these substances often contain high levels of lead, which could lead to brain damage.

public health nurse.

Traditional Indian eyeliner is made at home from sandalwood paste or the leaves of a local tree. Women also use the soot from a lit match to line their eyes. Both these traditional preparations are relatively harmless.

But commercial preparations are less benign, and may contain more than 84 percent lead. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has banned kohl, kajal and surma from import into the country, but they still gets through, often in the suitcases of travelers.

Of the 60 lead exposure cases Kurko is handling this year, four are related to the use of kohl, kajal and surma.

Dr. Veena Puri, a pediatrician with the Puri Pediatric Medical Group in Fremont, Calif., told *India-West* that lead exposure can present itself in a variety of ways in young children. The earliest symptom of exposure is anemia, said Puri, adding that lead exposure often reduces appetite, which increases the risk of anemia.

Children exposed to lead will also present symptoms of Pica, an eating disorder in which children crave mud, dirt or clay-like substances, and may eat paint chips, which also contain lead. Puri said she saw a lot of children

with Pica when she practiced in Delhi, and in an inner-city facility in New York.

More common are attention deficit disorder-type symptoms, including marked irritability and an inability to concentrate, Puri told *India-West*.

And, unless all applicators are sterile, children also run the risk of a bacterial eye infection, known as trachoma. Puri advises all her new parents not to use the eyeliners.

The ACLPPP recommends that all children under the age of six be tested for lead exposure. Kurko also advises parents to specifically ask their healthcare providers for the simple blood test. "We urge

parents to be pro-active because many doctors don't know about the cultural sources of lead," she said.

Julie Twichell, education and outreach manager with the ACLPPP, told *India-West* that adequate nutrition also plays a role. "If a child has good nutrition, there's less chance that lead will be absorbed," she said, adding that children who are anemic are more susceptible to poisoning. Frequent handwashing is also a good preventive measure, she said.

More information can be obtained at www.aclppp.org or [\[stopping-lead.org\]\(http://stopping-lead.org\).](http://www.</p>
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The New York City Department of Health launched a similar initiative last year and warns against the widely-distributed brand Hashmi.



A bottle of kohl, which may contain lead. (Alameda County Lead Poisoning Program photo)



Pediatrician Veena Puri, right, shown with some of her patients, says exposure to lead can cause irritability and an inability to concentrate in young children. (Puri Pediatric Medical Group photo)