

Letter to the Editor

LEAD-CONTAMINATED CANDIES IN SOUTHERN NEVADA

Lead-contaminated candies from Latin America are beginning to gain attention in the public media^{1,2} and in the medical literature.³⁻⁵ These candies come from a number of sources and are manufactured outside Food and Drug Administration regulatory control. In 2005, we sampled 50 imported Latin American candies sold in Southern Nevada. A total of 20 (40%) tested positive with an average lead content of 1.46 ± 0.27 mg/kg in the candies' wrappers and straws, based on standard Graphite Furnace Atomic Absorption Spectrophotometry methodology. Given these results, the Southern Nevada Health District issued a cease-and-desist order on February 13, 2006, to local commercial establishments selling imported Latin American candies.

Parallel with our efforts to eliminate lead-contaminated candies, the Southern Nevada Lead Poisoning Prevention Program identified 13 children whose increased blood lead levels (BLLs) were likely associated with the consumption of such candies. These cases were initially diagnosed by local physicians whose referrals resulted in home lead-risk investigations, where we encountered lead-tainted candies.

Childhood lead poisoning is an important health disparities issue that affects children of Hispanic communities in the U.S.^{6,7} In our ongoing Lead Poisoning Prevention program, 23 of our total cases (88%) are Hispanic.⁸ Among the 13 children with elevated BLLs and a history of imported candy consumption, 10 (77%) are also of Hispanic descent. Despite the present ban, many of these lead-tainted candies are still sold in flea markets and brought to Nevada by merchants and families returning to the U.S. from Latin America, as we have encountered in our home investigations.

A stronger collaboration among clinicians, public health personnel, and the local community is needed to effectively address this emerging problem. Our current efforts are directed to reaching the growing Hispanic community in Southern Nevada through education, blood lead screening of high-risk children, and increased surveillance of lead-containing food

products. Similar to other reports,^{4,9} our preliminary data suggest that lead-tainted candy wrappers, straws, and containers may likely be sources of lead toxicity. Further investigation is needed to elucidate the effects of lead-tainted candy wrappers and their contribution to childhood lead poisoning.

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