

# Lead poisoning from illicit opium

## Community factsheet

### What is lead?

Lead is a metal that is found naturally in the environment. It is used in industry and in the past was added to petrol and household paints. Exposure to lead can occur when contaminated food, substances, water, soil or dust is swallowed or breathed in and can have a serious effect on people's health. These effects depend on things like a person's age, the amount of lead they are exposed to and for how long, and if they have other health conditions.

### Illicit opium and lead

Illicit opium can contain high levels of lead. Recently some people in Victoria have had serious lead poisoning as a result of smoking or swallowing illicit opium. The illicit opium is thought to come from overseas, but was purchased in Australia. It is in the form of a dark resin or paste.

There is no way to know if opium is contaminated with lead or other harmful materials without testing.

### Lead poisoning

#### What are the symptoms?

Lead exposure can affect people differently, and symptoms depend on how a person is exposed to the lead, how much they have been exposed to and for how long. Significantly elevated blood lead levels can cause long-term organ damage or be fatal. Smaller exposures to lead may not cause any symptoms at all in some people.

Acute lead poisoning is very serious and is usually caused by a recent exposure to a high amount of lead. The symptoms may include:

- stomach pains
- constipation
- tiredness
- headache
- nausea and vomiting
- seizures

A person who is exposed to smaller amounts of lead over a longer time period may have symptoms such as:

- irritability
- lack of energy
- loss of appetite
- behavioural problems
- raised blood pressure
- poor coordination

Many of these symptoms could be caused by other conditions, **however if you have taken opium recently, especially since early 2016, you should see a doctor and request a blood lead test.**

Your doctor can also provide support for you to avoid possible lead exposure by assisting you to withdraw from opium use and to access appropriate replacement therapy if required.

In addition you can call DirectLine on 1800 888 236. This is a confidential service that provides information, counselling and referral to appropriate treatment services, so you can get the right type of care if required.

## Where can I get more help?

- Your doctor or a general medical practitioner
- For support with an addiction, talk to your doctor, counsellor or social worker as a starting point to find help for you and your family, or call DirectLine, Victoria's 24-hour confidential alcohol and drug counselling and referral service, on 1800 888 236
- If you are concerned about a young family member (up to the age of 25) call the Youth Drug and Alcohol Advice (YoDAA) telephone helpline on 1800 458 685
- Department of Health and Human Services, Environment Section (1300 761 874) for health advice about lead
- Visit the Better Health Channel for more information about lead exposure and your health:  
<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/HealthyLiving/Lead-exposure-and-your-health>
- Victorian Poisons Information Centre Tel. 13 11 26 – for advice when poisoning or suspected poisoning occurs and for poisoning prevention information (24 hours, 7 days)

To receive this publication in an accessible format phone 1300 761 874, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email [environmental.healthunit@dhhs.vic.gov.au](mailto:environmental.healthunit@dhhs.vic.gov.au)

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