

Medsafe Alert: Safety of Ayurvedic products – reports of lead poisoning

Recent testing by the Institute of Environmental Science and Research (ESR) has identified that some ayurvedic products used in New Zealand contain high levels of lead.

Medsafe initiated testing after a patient was hospitalised with lead poisoning. The source of lead was found by the Auckland Regional Public Health Service as being via the ingestion of an ayurvedic product. This product had been supplied to the patient by a New Zealand based ayurvedic practitioner.

Ayurvedic medicine is a type of traditional medicine native to India. In Western countries it is considered a form of complementary medicine. The aim of ayurvedic medicine is to integrate and balance the body, mind, soul and spirit.

This is thought to help in preventing illness and promote well-being. Heavy metals are commonly incorporated into ayurvedic products for a therapeutic effect.

ESR tested seven products and found that all contained lead. Five of those tested contained lead in sufficient quantities to be considered prescription medicines, with two products found to contain dangerously high levels (up to 57mcg per tablet). The product names are:

- Ziety
- Puspadhanwa Ras
- Ekangvir Ras
- Vatgajankush Ras
- Makardhwaj Bati

These products were all imported into New Zealand by an ayurvedic practitioner. In addition to lead being found in the products, arsenic and mercury were also found to be present in a number of products.

Key messages and advice

The Environmental Health Team from the Auckland Regional Public Health Service advises consumers to:

- Be cautious when purchasing herbal products from local shops or when obtaining medicines from overseas. Only purchase medicines where the contents are clearly listed and known to be safe.
- Consult your doctor or pharmacist before taking an ayurvedic remedy.
- Seek immediate medical attention if you become unwell while taking an ayurvedic product.

Medsafe is working with ayurvedic practitioner organisations to provide education regarding the risks associated with ingesting high levels of heavy metals, and to prevent practitioners from importing products that pose a threat to the health of their patients.

Healthcare professionals are encouraged to ask patients about their use of complementary and alternative medicines, and to report all suspected adverse reactions to CARM.