Dear Doctor

Re: Lead poisoning associated with illicit opium use

The Department of Health and Human Services has been notified of two males in the Melbourne area who developed severe lead poisoning associated with the ingestion or inhalation of illicit opium that was heavily contaminated with lead.

Source

The opium is suspected to originate from overseas, but was purchased locally, and is in the form of a dark resin/paste. The implicated source is a non-pharmaceutical product.

Due to its illicit nature, some opium users may not initially declare their use of this substance. Lead poisoning related to contaminated opium has previously been reported overseas and can involve delayed diagnosis or misdiagnosis.

Health effects

The health effects from lead exposure will differ depending on the source, the length of exposure (chronic vs acute), as well as the patient's age and comorbidities. People absorb lead into the body by breathing lead-contaminated air or swallowing lead-contaminated material.

Acute lead poisoning from contaminated opium may present with predominantly abdominal symptoms. Have a raised index of suspicion in patients presenting with unexplained abdominal pain, anorexia, nausea, vomiting and constipation. Other effects can include headache, lethargy, irritability, ataxia, impaired concentration, drowsiness, seizures, coma, arthralgia, myalgia, renal impairment, interstitial nephritis and anaemia. Severe cases can be fatal.

Action

Offer blood lead testing for patients presenting with symptoms consistent with lead poisoning, as well as those reporting any opium use. Elevated lead levels may need specialist care. For further advice contact the Victorian Poisons Information Centre on 13 11 26 any time.

Consider what form of support (counselling, withdrawal or replacement therapy) your patient requires to reduce their risk of lead exposure via opium use. Advice can be sought from the
Drug and Alcohol Clinical Advisory Service (DACAS) on 1800 812 804. Referrals to specialist assessment and drug treatment can be made via DirectLine on 1800 888 236.

A blood lead level above 5 micrograms per decilitre (or 0.24 micromoles per litre) is a notifiable condition to the Department of Health and Human Services. Notify via https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/infectious-diseases/notify-condition-now.

Further information

Further information on lead poisoning can be found in National Health and Medical Research Council: Managing individual exposure to lead in Australia- a guide for health practitioners https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/file/publications/16200_nhmrc_managing_individual_exposure_to_lead_in_australia_web.pdf

For more information please contact the Health Protection Branch, Environment Section at the Department of Health and Human Services on 1300 761 874.

Yours sincerely

Dr Danny Csutoros
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