

Traditional/Alternative Medications Can Be Dangerous

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Practitioners and adherents of traditional, so-called alternative medical systems often promote their practices as being more natural and safer than Western medicine. They claim that such systems have been used for thousands of years and that therefore they must be safe. But this is not necessarily the case, as reported in the December 14 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA).

Researchers from Harvard Medical School and their colleagues found that some herbal medical products often used in the traditional Indian Ayurvedic medical system may be contaminated by unsafe levels of heavy metals such as lead, mercury, and arsenic. Such remedies are widely used in India, and, according to the JAMA article, the Ayurvedic system is becoming more popular in the United States as well (see Saper RB, Kales SN, Paquin J, et al. Heavy Metal Content of Ayurvedic Herbal Medicine Products. JAMA 2004; 292(23):2868.)

The scientists bought Ayurvedic herbal medical products (HMPs) from stores within twenty miles of Boston that imported these supplements from South Asia. In all, they purchased seventy HMPs and assayed them for heavy metal content. Fourteen of the products, about 20% of the total sampled, tested positive for at least one of the metals assayed, and six of these were contaminated with more than one metal.

Of greater concern is the fact that half of the contaminated products were recommended for use by children as well as by adults. Of the products that tested positive, most -- if consumed as the manufacturer directs -- would result in an intake greater than the level allowed by either the Environmental Protection Agency or by the U.S. Pharmacopeia (a non-governmental agency that checks on the purity of pharmacological and other products).

The authors of the JAMA article call for mandatory testing of all imported dietary supplements, to ensure that such potentially dangerous contamination is caught before the supplements can cause irreversible health problems. They note that some of the levels of lead and arsenic that they discovered were in the range associated with previous reports of toxicity in the medical literature.

ACSH has frequently decried misguided health news reports that are based on hyperbole and exaggerations about possible health threats. But when there is sound research behind a warning, as there is in this case, it behooves the media and consumers to pay attention -- especially if they or their children are adherents of Ayurvedic medical practices.

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