



**2010 DOHMH Health Alert # 2
LEAD AND ARSENIC IN REMEDY FOR MORNING SICKNESS**

- **Ask your patients who may use West African remedies about their use of *Calabash Chalk*, also known as *Calabash Clay*, *Nzu*, *Poto*, *Calabar Stone*, *Ndom*, *Mabele*, *Argile*, or *La Craie*.**
- **If a patient reports using this product, tell your patient to stop using it and obtain a blood lead level. Testing for arsenic is not recommended at this time.**
- **Report all known or suspected poisonings by calling the New York City Poison Control Center 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at (212) POISONS.**

Please distribute to all clinical staff in Obstetrics & Gynecology, Primary Care, Family Medicine, Pediatrics, Emergency Medicine, Internal Medicine, Gastroenterology, Laboratory Medicine, Neurology, Occupational and Environmental Medicine and Complementary or Alternative Medicine. Please also share with your non-hospital based colleagues.

February 12, 2010

Dear Colleagues,

What Providers Should Know about *Calabash Chalk*

Calabash Chalk is a West African remedy used to relieve the symptoms of morning sickness during pregnancy. It may be sold as large pellets or in bulk and can resemble balls of clay or mud. It may be packaged in a clear plastic bag with or without labeling. It is also referred to as *Calabash Clay*, *Nzu*, *Poto*, *Calabar Stone*, *Ndom*, *Mabele*, *Argile* or *La Craie*. Following reports from the Federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA), DOHMH identified the product in several NYC stores. Laboratory tests reported elevated levels of lead and arsenic in these products. A general fact sheet on calabash chalk is available at:

<http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/lead/lead-calabash-chalk-faq.pdf>.

DOHMH recommends that health care providers:

- Ask patients **who may use West African remedies** about their use of *Calabash Chalk*, also known as *Calabash Clay*, *Nzu*, *Poto*, *Calabar Stone*, *Mabele*, *Argile*, or *La Craie*.
- If a patient reports using this product:
 - Advise your patient to stop using this product immediately and discard it in the garbage.
 - Tell your patient to clean the areas where this product was stored with soap and water to remove any remaining dust to prevent young children from exposure.
 - Obtain a blood lead level if your patient ingested any of this product.
- Counsel all women, especially pregnant women, on the dangers of *Calabash Chalk*, and advise them not to use the product.

- Testing for arsenic is not recommended at this time unless the patient reports symptoms consistent with acute arsenic toxicity. If considering testing for arsenic, consult with the NYC Poison Control Center.
- Report all cases of known or suspected poisonings to the New York City Poison Control Center at 212-POISONS (764-7667) or 800-222-1222 as required by the New York City Health Code.

What Providers Should Know About Other Imported Health Remedies

In the United States, approximately 1 out every 3 adult uses complementary or alternative medicine (CAM).¹ Natural and herbal remedies/medicine products are the most commonly used CAM therapy. Imported natural or herbal medicine products may be brought into the United States by family members, sold illegally in neighborhood stores or purchased over the Internet. Such products may contain harmful ingredients and may not have been approved for sale by the FDA. Also, NYC DOHMH has identified many products which are known to contain lead, mercury or arsenic. See <http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/lead/lead-herbalmed.shtml>. (Note: this is not a comprehensive list of all products which may contain harmful substances.)

DOHMH recommends that health care providers:

- Ask patients about their use of prescription medicines as well as non-prescription health remedies including supplements, vitamins, tonics, and other herbal or mineral products.
- If a patient reports using imported health remedies:
 - Consider the possibility that these products may contain harmful ingredients.
 - Consider testing your patient for lead and other heavy metals.
 - Maintain a high index of suspicion if your patient is symptomatic.
- If considering testing patients for lead or other heavy metals, consult with the New York City Poison Control Center. Call the New York City Poison Control Center 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at 212-POISONS or 800-222-1222.

Resources

For more information, visit www.nyc.gov/health.

As always, we appreciate our ongoing partnership with NYC healthcare providers in reporting and investigating unusual disease manifestations or clusters.

Sincerely,

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¹Barnes PM, Bloom B, Nahin RL. Complementary and alternative medicine use among adults and children: United States, 2007. National health statistics reports; no 12. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2008.