



# ALEXANDRIA HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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## LEAD POISONING: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT KOHL – KAJAL – SURMA

### 1. What is lead?

Lead is a common metal found in the earth. Lead is used in many cosmetics purchased outside the USA, such as kohl, kajal and surma. When people use products that contain lead on their body, the lead can get in their blood and in their nervous system. This can make them sick and can cause problems with behavior and growth. This is especially true for infants and children.



### 2. What is lead poisoning?

Lead poisoning is caused when someone swallows lead, breathes it in, or absorbs it through their skin. Lead poisoning is not always easy to recognize. Signs of lead poisoning can include headaches, stomach pain, vomiting, weakness, paleness, weight loss, learning difficulty, slowed speech development, and memory loss.

Even small amounts of lead can harm unborn babies, infants, and children. Larger amounts of lead can cause death. For pregnant women, lead can increase the risk of miscarriages, stillbirths and early delivery. Lead can also decrease a man's ability to make a woman pregnant.

Lead poisoning is treatable. It is important to call your doctor if you think you or a loved one may have lead poisoning.

Sources of lead poisoning include chips and dust from paint that contains lead; soil; imported or hand-made pottery with leaded glaze; and some imported candies or foods (for example from Mexico) containing chili or tamarind.

Cosmetics such as kohl, kajal, surma purchased outside the USA frequently contain lead.

### 3. How would my child or I get lead poisoning from kohl, kajal or surma?

Kohl, kajal, surma purchased outside the USA may contain lead. When you put it on your child's eyes, face, and/or feet, lead enters the body through the skin and eyes. This will make your child sick. But they might not feel sick right away and you might not notice it.

If you use kohl, kajal, surma purchased outside of the USA and it contains lead, you can absorb the lead through your skin. This can make you sick. If you are pregnant this can harm your unborn baby.

**4. If someone in my family has worn or used kohl, kajal, surma from outside the USA what should I do?**

Stop using all kohl, kajal, surma from outside the USA right away. Place all unused kohl, kajal, surma in a sealed plastic bag – hold onto this. Call the Alexandria Health Department (AHD) at 703-746-4823.

Wash hands and all body parts that may have come in contact with kohl, kajal, surma. Wash household surfaces, such as countertops and sinks, with wet, disposable towels. (Simply dusting the surface will spread it around).

Ask your doctor to do a blood test for lead. This should be done for all children and pregnant women who have used kohl, kajal, surma from outside the USA. You can be sick with lead poisoning but not know it. It is important to get a blood test and to keep all follow-up appointments.

**5. It is important for me to use kohl, kajal, surma in my culture. Is there a safe way to continue these traditions?**

Yes. Use lead-free kohl, kajal, surma that you can buy in stores in the USA. It is available at stores like Amazon.com, CVS, Target, or Walgreens. Some of the brands include L'Oreal, Maybelline, Milani, Revlon, and Rimmel. Most are described as “kohl eyeliner” or “kajal eyeliner”. These products, sold in US stores, do not contain lead and are safe.



**6. Where can I learn more?**

To learn more about lead poisoning and kohl, kajal, surma, visit:

<http://www.fda.gov/Cosmetics/ProductsIngredients/Products/ucm137250.htm>

For more information about lead:

AHD website (links to reliable sources): [www.alexandriava.gov/11622#Lead](http://www.alexandriava.gov/11622#Lead)

VDH Lead Poisoning Prevention: [www.vdh.virginia.gov/leadsafe/](http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/leadsafe/)

CDC – Information for Parents: [www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/parents.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/parents.htm)

**If you or a loved one may have been exposed to lead,  
call your doctor immediately.**