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## Millions of urban Indian children exposed to lead

**Keya Acharya**

Developing countries like India need to take stringent action to reduce the high level of lead in the atmosphere that is poisoning children in the cities, experts said at an international conference in Bangalore. Over half the children below 12 years of age living in urban India have higher than acceptable levels of lead in their blood, a six-city study by a NGO based in Bangalore has revealed.

The study titled 'Project Lead Free', conducted over two years, was presented at the February 8-11 'International Conference on Lead Poisoning', which was attended by more than 400 representatives from Asia, Africa, UN agencies and the US.

Lead poisoning is internationally recognised as a major public health problem. The Bangalore study by the NGO, the George Foundation, which was coordinated by the St John's Hospital here, is the first of its kind in India to fix numbers on the extent of the problem.




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Based on 22,000 blood samples, it revealed that 51.40 per cent of children below 12 in six cities have blood leadlevels, which are higher than 10 mg/dl (microgram per decilitre). The worst affected are young children in Mumbai where the level is 61.86 mg/dl.

Lead is an invisible and invasive poison that can be ingested, assimilated through the skin or inhaled through dust in the air. It persists in the soil, air, in drinking water and inside homes. Children absorb the metal more easily than adults. Exposure im-pairs their development and their power to perform well at certain ability tests.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has estimated that 15 to 18 million children in developing countries are already suffering from permanent brain damage due to lead poisoning.

Rich countries like the United States, Britain and Germany have stringent controls on lead emissions. The US Center for Disease Control and the Environment Protection Agency have successfully pursued an aggressive lead abatement policy since the 1970s.

Though lead levels in US children are below 10 mg/dl, scientists are now saying there are no 'safe'levels and the US national health programme is aiming at zero levels of lead, according to Dr Joel Schwartz, associate professor of Environment Epidemiology at the Harvard School of Public Health.

Developing countries lag far behind. In Mexico, studies have shown that their widely-used, ceramic,

lead-glazed pottery is high in lead. In Saudi Arabia, Nigeria and India, the black powder kohl, used as an eye cosmetic, is one source of high lead content. Other sources of lead pollution in developing countries are from lead smelters and soldering operations, which affect both workers and neighbouring populations, from old water pipelines, wheat grinding machines and jewellery making.

In the industrialised countries, lead from the paint and pipes of old houses remains a source of concern. Strategies for primary prevention through revamping of housing in old neighbourhoods in the US is under discussion there.

But the most serious cause of lead pollution is vehicular emissions from unleaded petrol in developing countries like India. With well over 31 million vehicles on the road and with a permissible level of 0.56 gram/litre that is still higher than international standards (0.013g/l), India is a major polluter.

Mexico and Thailand, two developing countries with infamous reputations for traffic and air pollution, have successfully phased out the use of lead gasoline. Bangladesh is expected to shortly ban leaded gasoline, while Egypt and China have phased out leaded petrol from a number of cities.

Don Ryan, president of the International Alliance to End Childhood Lead Poisoning, said 70 per cent of countries worldwide have introduced widespread unleaded gasoline use. 120 countries are still to introduce stringent lead emission controls.

The switch to unleaded gasoline needs upgradation of distillation techniques in the oil refineries.

Financial constraints for capital investment is one reason why the transition to unleaded fuels is a phase-out process.

In Thailand, the World Bank offered financial support for the switch to clean technology in the refineries. Richard Ackerman, the World Bank's senior environment manager, South Asia, said similar support may not be feasible in India and in other countries where petroleum refineries spill into the private sector.

The World Bank, however, offers support in research, technical guidance, training and advocacy in any developing country for the transition to unleaded fuels. Dr William Nitze, assistant administrator of the US Environment Protection Agency, has also offered technical assistance in charting up a national policy on lead prevention and pollution.

India introduced unleaded gasoline in its polluted capital city in September 1998. The government has now ambitiously promised unleaded petrol countrywide by April 1, 2000.

T K Bandhopadhyay, joint director in India's ministry of environment and forests, said his ministry was now 'taking steps' to make unleaded petrol cheaper than leaded petrol as an incentive for the consumer. Urgent action is required to make India's cities less hazardous for children.

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