



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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Letter to the Editor

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CAP: Accelerate laws to eliminate lead in paints

Thirty years ago the Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) made a call to the government to promulgate laws to eliminate lead in paints. Till today, we still find lead in our paints.

In 1992, we found seven out of nine enamel paints tested to contain lead above 600 parts per million (ppm). The highest amount of lead in that study was 11,700 ppm.

In 2016, a total of 39 samples of enamel decorative paint were analysed for lead content. Sixteen (16) of the samples contained a total lead concentration above 600 ppm. Out of these, 12 samples contained extremely high concentrations of lead above 10,000 ppm. The highest lead concentration detected was 150,000 ppm. CAP then made similar calls to the government to set a standard for lead in paint as we found more than 60% of the samples tested contained exceedingly high lead levels.

In 2020, we tested spray paints, of which nine out of 48 samples were found to contain lead levels above 90 ppm, including two samples with lead levels greater than 10,000 ppm.

Paints contain high levels of lead when the paint manufacturer intentionally adds one or more leaded compounds to the paint for some purpose. A paint product may also contain some amount of lead when paint ingredients contaminated with lead are used, or when there is cross-contamination from other product lines in the same factory.

Lead is a cumulative toxicant that affects multiple body systems. It is particularly hazardous to young children, pregnant women, and all those that are exposed to it.

Lead is harmful at all levels of exposure, thus there is no level of exposure to lead that is known to be without harmful effects.¹ Children especially aged six and under are particularly vulnerable to lead exposure. Once lead enters a child's body through ingestion, inhalation, or across the placenta, it has the potential to damage several biological systems and pathways.

Even relatively low levels of exposure can cause serious and irreversible neurological damage. When a young child is exposed to lead, the harm to her or his nervous system makes it more likely that the child will have learning difficulties in school.

The World Health Organization (WHO), calls lead paint "a major flashpoint" for children's potential lead poisoning and says that "since the phase-out of leaded petrol, lead paint is one of the largest sources of exposure to lead in children." Thus, urgent measures need to be taken to reduce critical sources of lead exposure to young children, in particular lead in paint.

The health impacts of lead exposure on young children's brains are lifelong, irreversible and untreatable. Lead is also introduced into the gastrointestinal tract when children who tend to suck their fingers and put things in their mouths, chew on objects such as toys, household furniture or other articles painted with lead paint.

Lead is especially dangerous to children's developing brains and can cause reduced intelligence quotient (IQ) and attention span, impaired learning ability, and increased risk of behavioural problems. These health impacts also have significant economic costs to countries.

Presently there is no regulation in Malaysia limiting the amount of lead in paint for household and decorative use.

As of 31 December 2020, 79 countries have legally binding controls in place to limit the production, import and sale of lead paints, while another 26 are in the early or final stages of drafting laws. China, Colombia, Lebanon and Vietnam established new or improved lead paint laws in 2020.

Just recently, countries like Georgia, Peru, and Ukraine adopted regulations that sets 90 ppm limit on lead in paint. In addition to these, several other countries are in various stages of developing lead paint regulations aided by the ongoing SAICM GEF project on lead in paint. The International Pollutants Elimination Network (IPEN) and CAP are executing partners under the project.

After lagging behind, the Malaysian government has now started working on drafting standards on lead in paint and the enabling law. This is the way forward as without regulatory measures Malaysia will be a dumping ground for products with high levels of lead that have been rejected by other countries.

In the interim, we urge the authorities to test and ban products including paint that have been found to contain high levels of lead. Educational campaigns to create awareness regarding the health impacts of lead exposure and measures to prevent childhood lead exposure are urgently needed.

As lead has a strong impact on children, the Malaysian government has to accelerate efforts to eliminate the use of lead in paint, for the sake of our children and future generations.

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President

¹ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/lead-poisoning-and-health>