Lead found in children's food illustrates need for 'continued advocacy' for testing standards

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Certain Lunchables kits and brands of veggie puffs were tested for lead by Consumer Reports and found to have concerning amounts of the metal. Credit: Lunchables

Lunchables and popular brands of children's veggie puffs were found to have high levels of lead, something Northeastern expert Neil Maniar said families "shouldn't gloss over."

You might worry about lead in your pipes or the base of your beloved Stanley cup. But what about your food?

Consumer Reports broke a lot of bad news to parents when it detailed how much lead was found in two popular products aimed toward children. The company's testing found Lunchables and certain brands of veggie puffs had concerning amounts of lead in them.

"This is one of those things that families shouldn't gloss over," said Neil Maniar, professor of the practice and director of the masters of public health program at Northeastern University. "There is a need for continued advocacy to make sure that we have the proper testing standards across all foods and that the food supply is safe."

Consumer Reports based its testing around California's law that sets a maximum allowable dosage level (MADL) exposure that people should digest. (However, no amount of lead is truly safe to consume, said Kimberly Garrett, a postdoctoral research associate and member of the PFAS Project Lab at Northeastern, adding that California's MADLs are "very, very conservative.")

Consumer Reports found that Lunchables and similar snack kits contain "potentially concerning" levels of lead. Certain variations of Lunchables' snack kits had between 69% and 74% of the maximum allowable dosage level.

The organization also tested baby snacks from brands like Lesser Evil, Serenity Kids and Once Upon a Farm. The testing found that Lesser Evil's "Intergalactic Voyager Veggie Blend" puffs and its "Sweet Potato

Apple Asteroids" puffs had 112% and 60% of the maximum allowable dosage level. Serenity Kids' grain free puffs with tomatoes, herbs and bone broth contained 53% of the MADL.

How does lead end up in children's food?

Both Lesser Evil and Lunchables came out with statements defending their products, with Kraft Heinz, the company behind Lunchables, saying that the lead is "naturally occurring."

This is partially true. The presence of lead in food is a result of it being "ubiquitous" throughout our everyday environment, according to Garrett; it can be found everywhere from soil to home piping.

Lead can find its way into food through contaminated soil. Garrett said root vegetables are particularly susceptible because they take up lead in the soil through their roots. The substance then gets caught in this part of the plant.

Garrett added that research has found that the root area of the plant can have a lower pH than its other parts, leading to increased lead absorption. Kids foods made with cassava (found in the Lesser Evil veggies puffs) and other root vegetables like sweet potatoes and carrots are more likely to have lead in them if grown in contaminated soil.

"There is no safe level of lead," added Garrett. "However, we are exposed to lead throughout our daily lives and that's a product of natural lead in the soil, but in higher concentrations because of industrial contamination. So I don't think it should be normal that there's lead in food, but I'm not surprised that there is lead in food."

But Maniar added that lead can find its way into food like Lunchables during its processing.

"As foods become more processed, you're likely to have a higher concentration of some metals in certain types of food," he said. "One possibility (is) the equipment being used. It could be a function of the equipment if there are other contaminants and things like that on it."

Unlike with water, there are no regulations around lead in food productions, Garrett said, so products can hit the market without ever being tested.

"The burden should be placed on manufacturers to ensure that their products are safe before they go to market," Garrett said.

How worried should parents be about lead in kids' food?

Given the side effects of lead exposure and the lack of regulation, it's natural to be concerned about high lead levels in products aimed at kids. But there are a few things to consider.

For one thing, Maniar pointed out that while you would ideally not be exposed to any level of lead, the numbers in the report are based on what you should take in during a day, so the threat is heightened if you eat these products on a more-than-daily basis.

"The Lunchables, for example, were within the limits, but that's per item tested," Maniar said. "If you have someone that's eating that multiple times a day, that's something to be concerned about."

There are also safer alternatives: Consumer Report's testing found that Once Upon a Farm creates a similar product with only a fraction of the lead of some of the other products tested.

Maniar also recommended consumers concerned about lead think twice before eating a lot of processed food, something that he pointed out is generally not recommended by doctors anyway.

Garrett added that those worried about lead should start by checking the pipes in their home or the soil in their yard.

This is also the moment, Maniar added, for consumers to start speaking up about the presence of lead in their food.

"Instances like this are important opportunities to really advocate for greater testing to make sure we have the best safety standards possible across the entire food supply and across the food production chain," he said.

"That goes all the way from farming and thinking about the environments around farms and the types of contaminants that can make their way into the soil that is actually growing our food supply. This is something where we can learn from it and we can figure out how to continue to make the system better and safer for everyone."

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