

From The Chief Medical Officer:
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All General Practitioners (for cascade to practice nurses)

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Dear Colleague

Calabash Chalk (Calabar stone, La Craie, Argile, Nzu, Mabele)

- Calabash chalk is traditionally consumed by the Nigerian and wider west African community (and some Asian women) as a remedy for morning sickness. Samples of chalk analysed by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) have been found to contain high concentrations of lead.
- Consumption of this product would result in an undesirable increase in lead intakes. At the highest lead levels found, women taking 60g a day of the most contaminated product would exceed the safety guideline for lead 4.5 fold, before taking into account any additional exposure from other sources.
- Exposure to lead may result in a number of harmful effects, and the developing child is particularly at risk of effects on the nervous system. Studies have shown that prolonged exposure to elevated levels of lead can impair intellectual performance in children.

Patients consuming the product should be advised that:

- Consuming calabash chalk will increase lead intakes which is undesirable.
- Pregnant and breastfeeding women should stop taking Calabash chalk immediately because exposure to high levels of lead poses a risk to the mental development of their developing foetus and young child.
- Women who are breastfeeding and who have been taking calabash chalk should not stop breastfeeding. The transfer of lead into breast milk is low, and the benefits of breastfeeding outweigh the risks. Breastfeeding is accepted as the best form of nutrition for infants to ensure a good start in life. Breastfeeding confers significant short and long term health benefits for both mother and infants beyond the period of breastfeeding itself.
- Once consumption of the chalk is stopped the levels of lead in the body will gradually return to normal.

Background

The chalk can be bought in ethnic shops and markets in the form of blocks, pellets and powders. There are no particular brands, batches or best before dates. Pictures can be viewed on the FSA website www.food.gov.uk.

A Food Hazard Warning has been issued by the Agency in Northern Ireland asking environmental health officers to check whether they can find the chalk in their area, and if so remove it from sale. The Food Standards Agency in London also intends to raise with the European Commission the possibility of proposing EU-wide measures to prohibit the sale of Calabash chalk.

Anyone who has been eating calabash chalk and is concerned about their health or would like advice on other remedies for morning sickness should contact their GP or mid-wife.

Yours sincerely

HENRIETTA CAMPBELL (DR)

Chief Medical Officer

Cc: Directors of Public Health
Nursing Directors of Boards
Medical Directors of Trusts