

Kids against candy

With lead-tainted candy from Mexico still for sale in the Mission, health officials and educators – and even some candy-loving kids – are working to warn the community about its perils.

By Tali Woodward



Getting the word out: Mission stores still stock Vero Mango, Limon 7, Canel's Gum, Lucas Acidito, Pelon Pelo Rico, and other kinds of candy that have been found to contain dangerous levels of lead. *Guardian photo by Lori Spears*

OF THE MANY candies on display in the produce markets near her Mission District home, Vanessa Diaz always liked the Lucas brand chili powders the most. Lucas is technically a seasoning for fruit and vegetables, but kids often eat it plain, dumping the powder straight onto their tongues in what they call a "waterfall."

"It tastes spicy, and then, when all the spice is gone, it tastes sweet," Vanessa recently described.

Lucas comes in canisters decorated with a sunglasses-wearing duck and is available in multiple flavors, including Acidito and Limon. Until recently, Vanessa ate Lucas or some similar candy each month, and admits she would have eaten more if her parents had supplied it.

Now, instead of asking for more candy, Vanessa is trying to convince other kids not to eat Lucas – and even asking store owners to post information that might discourage kids or their parents from buying the spicy-sweet candy.

"It's not good for your health – especially for kids," she explained.

Though many people don't know it, government tests have revealed that some of the Mexican candies most popular with young Latinos in San Francisco – including Lucas powders, Chaca Chaca, Pico Diana, and Pelon Pelo Rico – sometimes contain potentially dangerous levels of lead. As Vanessa and the rest of her fifth-grade class at Leonard R. Flynn Elementary have learned, lead can cause a whole gamut of health problems when it builds up in the body. Even traces of the metal can lower I.Q., stunt growth, and make it

harder for kids to pay attention. High levels of lead can affect hearing, the kidneys, and the nervous system – and can even cause seizures or death.

To date, tests have detected dangerous levels of lead in at least 112 kinds of candy, most of them from Mexico. The California Department of Health Services has alerted consumers about just six of the candies – but even those can still be found in San Francisco.

For instance, the DHS issued an alert about four flavors of Lucas seasoning last August. All had tested high for lead, and one flavor, Lucas Acidito, sometimes registered five times as much lead as state guidelines allow. Mars Inc., which owns the subsidiary that makes Lucas products, insisted the seasonings were safe but stopped producing the flavors – and voluntarily recalled existing stock.

But even Lucas Acidito is still for sale in some of the Mission's bodegas. Behind the counters, you can sometimes spot shrink-wrapped cases of the treat, canister upon canister poised to make it into the hands and bodies of local children.

Unless Vanessa and her classmates can stop them.

Contaminated candy

Wendy Ginsburg, an Americorps fellow who works with Vanessa's fifth-grade class as part of her teacher training, said the class stumbled upon the lead-in-candy issue two months ago when they were learning about proper nutrition. Ginsburg admits she was worried some Flynn families might not respond well to concerns about candies they have been eating all their lives. "But it's lead in candy – you can't mess around with that," she said. "All the parents have been really supportive."

Ginsburg designed the lead candy project in keeping with the principles of "service learning," an educational approach that aims to teach children and strengthen the community by engaging kids with an important civic issue. So the kids came up with their own ideas for how to tackle the project. They started by gathering research about the candy and about lead poisoning.

The class learned that information about lead-laden candy was spotty until the *Orange County Register* published a six-part series detailing the dangers last April. The *Register* found government agencies have sporadically tested some of these candies for years – and one out of four times, they found dangerous levels of lead. Often, a single piece of candy contained more lead than the U.S. Food and Drug Administration recommends ingesting in a day.

But only rarely did the government even notify consumers of the results. As part of the two-year investigation, the paper also hired a lab to conduct new tests, and confirmed that many candies still had dangerous levels of lead. Once contacted by *Register* reporters, the

FDA issued a warning that "it would be prudent to not allow children to eat these products at this time."

It's hard to know exactly which candies are dangerous because the test results vary even within brands. The *Register* found that some Mexican candy companies even make two versions of the same product: one using more expensive ingredients and methods that is intended to meet the United States' stricter standards, and a cheaper – and more dangerous – version that is supposed to be sold only inside Mexico. In the era of free trade, even the Mexican formulas often make it across the border.

But the Flynn kids learned there were ways to assess the risk. Most of the candies that have high levels of lead include chili or tamarind, a sugary fruit. The students made posters explaining how the ingredients suck up lead from the soil as they grow, and – if they're not thoroughly washed – carry it straight into the candy they're used to make. Candies that don't contain chili or tamarind can also be harmful if their wrappers are printed with lead ink or they are sold in tiny clay pots that have been painted with lead-infused glaze. The *Register* and some health agencies have compiled guides to the potentially dangerous treats.

The fifth-graders also made flyers detailing their research and surveyed their school to see how many kids were eating candy from Mexico.

They also had a visit from Leticia Medina, who oversees the city's Childhood Lead Prevention program. She told the Flynn students that last summer the Department of Public Health (DPH) conducted a survey of its own and found the overwhelming majority of kids in the Mission eat Mexican candy. Medina explained eating the candy a few times wouldn't do any harm, but because lead builds up in the body over time, regularly eating tainted candy could cause serious damage. And according to the survey, 75 percent of Mission children under seven were eating candy containing both fruit and chili three to four times a week, with 24 percent consuming it daily.

The kids working on the lead candy project would like to warn all of them about the risks. They've written and performed a play and built a Web site to spread the word. One student, Zeprina Eglip, even wrote a poem, part of which reads:

Candy isn't as dandy as you think

It can give you a sickness that really stinks

Gives you headaches, nausea, and more

Makes your brain take a little snore

Getting the lead out

As their education campaign drew to a close, the Flynn students didn't feel like they'd solved the problem: the candies were still available at the produce markets and corner stores of the Mission, recalls and health alerts notwithstanding.

So on May 12, Vanessa, Zeprina, and two of their classmates stopped in stores along Mission and 24th Streets, urging store owners and managers to post health alerts in their stores.

Vanessa told the *Bay Guardian* that all of the stores reacted positively: "They said they'd see if their boss would let them, and they'd put it up." A week later, she went back to check on one of stores, and was disappointed that the flyer didn't seem to be hanging anywhere near the jars of Mexican candy.

When we went to check on the markets that had been visited by the Flynn kids, we still spotted many of the candy brands that have fared poorly on lead tests. Lucas Acidito and Lucas Limon, tamarind treats called Tama-Roca and Pelon Pelo Rico, Canel's Gum, and the bite-size Montes Tomy were all available for purchase. We even found suspicious candies like Pico Diana, Limon 7, and the chili-covered lollipop Mango Vero for sale at Safeway. The DPH recently surveyed more than 400 stores and found that a quarter of them were selling candies that may contain high levels of lead. In the Mission, just over half of the stores surveyed had the suspicious treats in stock.

The candies look innocent enough, and the primary culprits in lead poisoning continue to be contaminated paint and dust. But leaden candy is already causing local health problems. In 2004 city health workers linked four cases of lead poisoning directly to Mexican candy. (A couple of years ago the state determined that Mexican candy was a possible factor in 150 out of 1,000 cases of lead poisoning.)

A full 80 percent of the kids who are lead poisoned in California are Latino. And though laws require lead screening for at-risk one- and two-year-olds, slightly older kids often don't get tested.

"The bottom line is that it harms their future," health educator Medina said. "By the time a child has 10 micrograms, he's lost a lot of I.Q. If a child has 6 to 9 micrograms, we take action – we don't want it to go over 5 micrograms."

Taking a similar approach to the Flynn students, the city health department sent a letter to local stores May 18 asking them to "remove and refrain from selling any candies that you suspect may contain lead." But Medina would like to see the problem addressed at its source: "We'd prefer that the candy is safe. We want the FDA to take action – to work with the Mexican companies to make it safe."

She's not alone – the Board of Supervisors passed legislation in January urging state and federal authorities to crack down on contaminated candy. Two bills to regulate the candy are pending in the California legislature, and another that deals with lead in candy

wrappers is before the U.S. Congress. The California attorney general is also negotiating with 33 candy makers whom he sued last year.

In the meantime, Vanessa and Zeprina's class is trying to let all San Francisco families know that the delicious treats are still available – and pose bigger threats than cavities.