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Current Awareness and Knowledge of Heavy Metals: A Short Review

Maghchiche Abdelhak [1]**; and Meghchiche Nourelhouda**[2]

[1]Analytical Chemistry Laboratory, Pharmacy Department, University of Batna2, Algeria. [2]University El Hadj Lakhdar, Batna1, Batna, Algeria.

Corresponding author: *amaghchiche@yahoo.fr*

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Abstract

This review discusses public health hazards associated with environmental heavy metals, focusing on those that are especially toxic and persistent: lead, mercury, cadmium, arsenic, chromium, copper, nickel, and zinc. Most of the discussion in this review is devoted to identifying potential routes of exposure and the potential health effects that these metals might pose. In addition, the effectiveness of educational programs is considered, together with demographic factors influencing public knowledge. The methodology includes a detailed literature review to highlight gaps in knowledge and the impacts of the education process. The preliminary findings show very limited knowledge among the public about the risks from toxic metals, especially among children and people working in the industrial sectors. Notwithstanding the aforementioned educational initiatives, there is still a greater need for further intervention strategies to increase awareness and ensure safety. Further, the review shows a lack of concerted efforts on strategies aimed at reducing heavy metal toxicity, including chelation therapy, phytoremediation, and advanced techniques like electro sorption and nanotechnology. The text further examines the efficacy of dietary selections and supplements as natural detoxification techniques that could assist the body in expelling these harmful substances. The study thus concludes emphatically that mitigating the risks of exposure to heavy metals requires increasing public awareness and education, imposing strict regulations on emissions from industries, and involving the community. Policymakers, educators, and health professionals must be unified on a single platform to spread awareness about effective remediation and natural detoxification methodologies. Heavy metals largely threaten human health and ecosystems, so the protection of human health and the maintenance of ecosystems require a comprehensive approach.

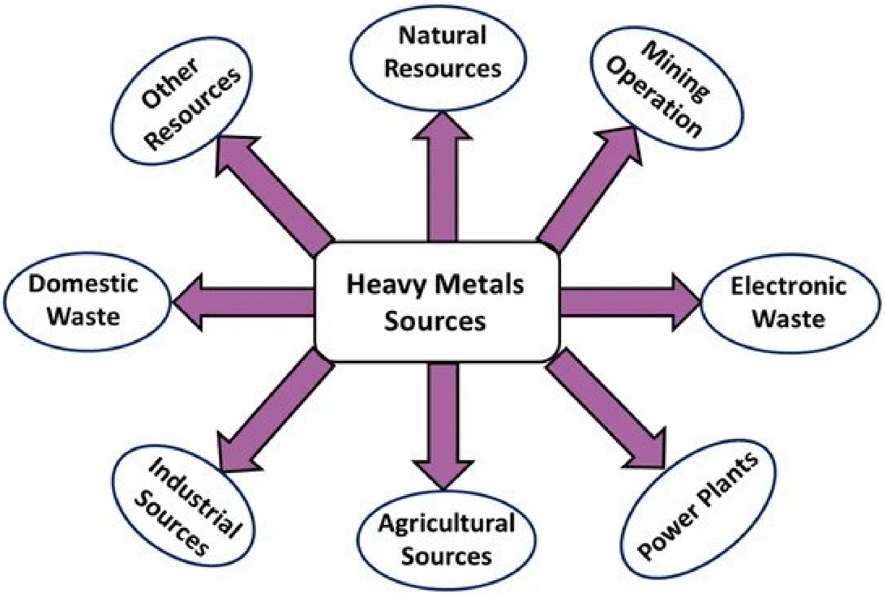
Keywords: Heavy Metal, Toxicity, Environmental Pollution, Bioaccumulation, Remediation Strategies.

Introduction

Metals such as copper, mercury, cadmium, and arsenic are naturally occurring elements that present significant threats to public health and the environment due to their toxicity and persistence in ecosystems (Järup, 2003; Tchounwou et al., 2012; Das et al., 2023). While these metals are utilized in various industrial and technological applications, they can accumulate in biological systems, resulting in adverse health effects, including neurotoxicity, kidney damage, and various cancers, even at low exposure levels (Briffa et al., 2020; Tchounwou et al., 2012). This review addresses the critical issue of insufficient public awareness and knowledge regarding heavy metals, highlighting a notable gap in understanding the effectiveness of educational interventions and the demographic factors influencing this awareness. This knowledge deficit impedes the development of targeted strategies to mitigate exposure risks and promote sustainable practices. This review examines awareness levels of heavy metal sources and toxicity across different demographics, and evaluates the effectiveness of educational interventions in improving this knowledge. It also investigates how demographic factors like age and education influence awareness of heavy metal health risks. By exploring these questions, the review aims to provide insights into the current state of public awareness and the efficacy of educational programs designed to reduce heavy metal exposure risks. The findings will inform the development of targeted interventions and policies that promote safe practices and protect human health, thereby supporting environmental and ecological sustainability. Heavy metals can enter the food chain, leading to bioaccumulation and posing risks to both human health and ecosystems (Afzal & Mahreen, 2024; Vardhan et al., 2024). Long-term exposure to heavy metals can severely affect neurological, renal, and respiratory functions and may lead to chronic diseases similar to Alzheimer's and Parkinson's (Tchounwou et al., 2012). Moreover, excessive exposure, particularly through particulate matter like urban traffic dust, poses significant health risks via inhalation, ingestion, and dermal contact (Mahmoud et al., 2023). Understanding the complexities of heavy metal exposure and its health implications is essential for developing effective interventions and enhancing public awareness. The widespread contamination of air, water, and soil through industrial activities, mining, and improper waste disposal has intensified concerns regarding heavy metal exposure, especially among vulnerable populations such as children (Tchounwou et al., 2012; Järup, 2003). Increased public awareness and understanding of the sources and health impacts of heavy metals are critical for fostering preventive measures and promoting safe practices to mitigate exposure risks (Abdel-Rahman, 2022). Effective public health policies and community education initiatives are vital for addressing the ongoing challenges associated with heavy metal contamination and safeguarding human health (Abdel-Rahman, 2022).

Overview of Heavy Metals

Heavy metals are metallic elements with high atomic weights and densities, which can be toxic to humans and the environment, particularly when accumulated in organisms. Common heavy metals include lead, mercury, cadmium, and arsenic, each associated with significant health risks. Sources of heavy metals are both natural and anthropogenic; natural sources include volcanic eruptions and weathering of rocks, while anthropogenic sources stem from industrial activities such as mining, smelting, and the use of heavy metals in agriculture and manufacturing, as indicated in (Sheme1). Exposure routes include inhalation of contaminated air, ingestion of polluted food and water, and dermal contact, with food and cigarette smoke being notable sources of cadmium exposure (Jyothi, 2020; Raj Kumar et al., 2020).



Scheme 1. Primary Sources of Heavy Metals (Das& Poater, 2021).

Toxicity of Heavy Metals

Heavy metals and their ability to accumulate in biological systems and the environment pose significant health risks to humans due to their toxicity, as indicated in (Table 1). Exposure to these metals can occur through various routes, including ingestion, inhalation, and dermal contact, often resulting from industrial activities, contaminated water, and food sources, as shown in (Figure 1). The health effects of heavy metal toxicity are diverse, ranging from acute symptoms like nausea and respiratory distress to chronic conditions such as neurological disorders, organ damage, and cancer. (Table 1) summarizes the most toxic effects of heavy metals. The mechanisms of toxicity often involve oxidative stress, disruption of cellular processes, and interference with metabolic pathways, underscoring the need for stringent regulatory measures to limit exposure and mitigate health risks associated with heavy metals in the environment (Martin & Griswold, 2009; Tchounwou et al., 2012; Jaishankar et al., 2014).

Table 1: Heavy Metals: Sources of Exposure and Environmental Influence

Heavy Metal	Common Sources of Exposure	Influence on Environment	Reference
Lead (Pb)	Mining, smelting, old paint, batteries	Soil contamination, reduced plant growth, bioaccumulation in food chains	(Paul et al., 2012)
Mercury (Hg)	Coal burning, gold mining, industrial processes	Water pollution, bioaccumulation in aquatic organisms, disruption of ecosystems	(Paul et al., 2012; Mitra et al., 2022)
Cadmium (Cd)	Phosphate fertilizers, industrial emissions, batteries	Soil contamination, reduced soil fertility, accumulation in crops	(Paul et al., 2012; Mitra et al., 2022)
Arsenic (As)	Pesticides, wood preservatives, mining	Groundwater contamination, soil toxicity, harm to aquatic life	(Paul et al., 2012)
Chromium (Cr)	Leather tanning, steel production, electroplating	Soil and water pollution, toxicity to plants and aquatic organisms	(Paul et al., 2012; Mitra et al., 2022)
Copper (Cu)	Mining, pesticides, antifouling paints	Toxicity to aquatic organisms, soil microorganism disruption	(Paul et al., 2012)
Nickel (Ni)	Mining, metal plating, battery production	Soil contamination, phytotoxicity, negative impacts on soil microorganisms	(Paul et al., 2012; Mitra et al., 2022)
Zinc (Zn)	Galvanization, rubber production, mining	Soil acidification, toxicity to plants and aquatic organisms at high levels	(Paul et al., 2012; Mitra et al., 2022)

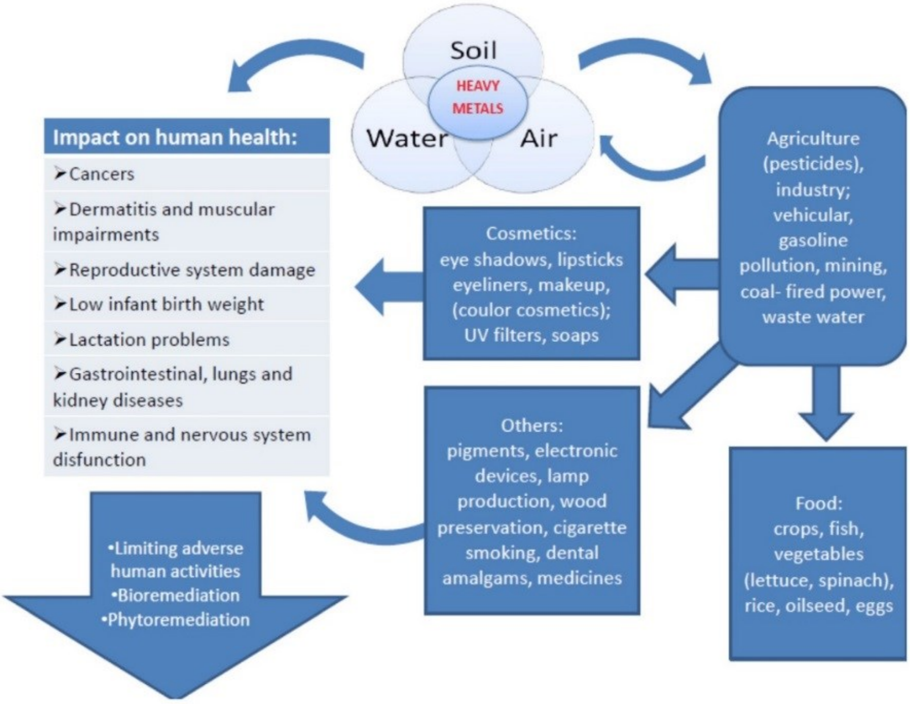


Figure 1: Routes of Exposure and Health Impacts of Toxic Metals (Witkowska et al., 2021).

Heath Impacts of Heavy Metals

Heavy metals pose significant health risks due to their toxicity, which varies depending on the specific metal and the level of exposure. Commonly encountered heavy metals include arsenic, lead, mercury, cadmium, and chromium, each associated with distinct health effects. For instance, arsenic can cause both acute symptoms, such as gastrointestinal distress and cardiovascular issues, and chronic conditions, including skin lesions and various cancers (Engwa et al., 2019; Martin & Griswold, 2019). Lead exposure is particularly harmful to the nervous system, especially in children, leading to developmental delays and cognitive impairments. Mercury is known for its neurotoxic effects, which can result in tremors and cognitive dysfunction, while cadmium exposure is linked to kidney damage and lung disease (Mitra et al., 2022; Vardhan et al., 2019). The impacts of heavy metal exposure can be classified into acute and chronic effects. Acute exposure typically results in immediate health issues, while chronic exposure can lead to long-term health problems, including degenerative diseases akin to Parkinson's and Alzheimer's (Engwa et al., 2019; Mahmoud et al., 2023). Vulnerable populations, such as children, pregnant women, and individuals with pre-existing health conditions, are at a heightened risk of adverse effects due to their developing systems and increased susceptibility to toxins (Mitra et al., 2022; Vardhan et al., 2019). Therefore, understanding the health impacts of heavy metals is crucial for implementing effective public health strategies and protective measures.

Neurotoxicity

Environmental exposures to heavy metals, particularly lead, cadmium, and manganese, have been implicated in the development and progression of neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer and Parkinson’s. These metals are pervasive in the environment and can easily enter the human body, accumulating in the brain and causing neurotoxic effects. Studies indicate that lead exposure is associated with cognitive decline and may contribute to the pathologies characteristic of Alzheimer’s disease, such as amyloid-beta plaque formation and tau protein phosphorylation, which are critical in the disease's progression (Bakulski et al., 2020). Similarly, cadmium has been linked to neuro-inflammation and neuronal damage, further exacerbating cognitive impairments (Carmona et al., 2021). The mechanisms by which these heavy metals affect neurological health include oxidative stress, disruption of cellular signaling, and inflammation, all of which can lead to neuronal death and the onset of symptoms associated with Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s diseases (Manivannan et al., 2019).

Nephrotoxicity

Environmental toxins such as cadmium, lead, and arsenic are significant contributors to the development of chronic renal failure, with epidemiological studies demonstrating a strong correlation between exposure to these heavy metals and chronic kidney injury. The mechanisms through which these metals induce nephrotoxicity are complex and not fully understood, involving various pathways that lead to renal damage. Despite regulations aimed at reducing heavy metal exposure, these toxins persist in the environment, posing ongoing risks to public health and necessitating increased vigilance in monitoring and reducing environmental levels of these nephrotoxins (Sabath & Robles-Osorio, 2012).

Carcinogenicity

Heavy metals such as arsenic, cadmium, chromium, and nickel are classified as Group 1 carcinogens by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), indicating sufficient evidence of their carcinogenicity in humans. These metals induce cancer primarily through mechanisms involving oxidative stress, DNA damage, and disruption of cellular processes, leading to mutations and malignant transformations. Chronic exposure to these heavy metals can result in various cancers, including skin, lung, bladder, and prostate cancers. The ongoing industrial use and environmental contamination of these metals pose significant public health risks, necessitating preventive measures and monitoring to mitigate exposure (Aalami et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2015).

Current Awareness and Knowledge

Current levels of public awareness regarding heavy metal exposure and health risks are generally low, with many individuals lacking knowledge about the sources and dangers associated with these toxic metals. For instance, a study indicated that schoolchildren exhibited no awareness of products containing heavy metals and their hazardous effects, highlighting a significant gap in education on this issue (Gajbhiye & Wadnerwar, 2021). Various educational efforts have been implemented to increase awareness, including public campaigns aimed at informing communities about the risks of heavy metal contamination, particularly in agricultural settings and cultural products. However, critical gaps remain in public knowledge, particularly regarding the specific health impacts of heavy metals and the preventive measures that can be taken. Many individuals are unaware of the long-term health effects associated with chronic exposure, such as cognitive impairments and developmental issues in children, as well as the importance of monitoring and regulating heavy metal levels in the environment (Afzal & Mahreen, 2024). Addressing these gaps through targeted educational initiatives is essential for improving public health outcomes.

Methods for Assessing Knowledge and Awareness

Surveys and interviews are key methodologies for assessing public knowledge and awareness of health issues, including heavy metal exposure. Recent studies reveal significant gaps in understanding, particularly regarding biomedical research, highlighting the need for targeted educational initiatives. These assessments are crucial for identifying knowledge deficiencies and informing curriculum development to enhance public awareness (Khoi & Liamputtong, 2023; Abu Farha, 2020).

Interventions and Recommendations

To enhance public understanding of heavy metal exposure and its health risks, several strategies can be implemented, including public awareness campaigns utilizing multiple platforms to disseminate information, the development of accessible educational materials, the organization of workshops and community engagement events, and the integration of lessons on environmental health into school curricula (Sripada & Lager, 2022; Afzal & Mahreen, 2024). Policy changes and actions are also recommended, such as implementing stricter regulations on industrial emissions and waste disposal, allocating funding for research and educational initiatives, establishing public health programs focused on high-risk populations, and collaborating with NGOs to leverage their expertise and outreach capabilities (Sripada & Lager, 2022; Afzal & Mahreen, 2024). By adopting these interventions and policy recommendations, it is possible to significantly improve awareness, reduce exposure, and promote better health outcomes for communities affected by heavy metal contamination.

Combined Strategies for Reducing Heavy Metal Toxicity

To eliminate the toxicity of heavy metals, as shown in (Table 2), several effective methods can be utilized. Chelation therapy employs agents like D-penicillamine and DMSA to bind heavy metals in the body and facilitate their excretion, which is particularly effective for metals such as arsenic and mercury (Kim et al., 2019). Natural detoxification can be enhanced by incorporating substances like glutathione, chlorella, and herbs such as cilantro and garlic, which help bind heavy metals and support liver function (Ravichandran, 2011). Additionally, a diet rich in antioxidants, vitamins, and anti-inflammatory foods, along with proper hydration and lifestyle adjustments, can support the body's detoxification processes. For environmental contamination, advanced remediation techniques like electro-sorption and nanotechnology are explored for their effectiveness in removing heavy metals from water and soil (Kim et al., 2019). Together, these strategies can significantly reduce heavy metal toxicity and improve health outcomes.

Table 2: Overview of Heavy Metals: Toxicity and Remediation Strategies

Heavy Metal	Toxicity	Remediation Strategies	Reference
Lead (Pb)	Neurotoxicity, developmental delays, anemia	Phytoremediation, chelation therapy, soil washing	(Abd Elnabi et al., 2023; Niede & Benbi, 2022).
Mercury (Hg)	Neurotoxicity, kidney damage, vision/hearing impairment	Bioremediation, activated carbon adsorption	(Abd Elnabi et al., 2023; Kumar, 2024).
Cadmium (Cd)	Kidney dysfunction, bone fragility, lung damage	Phytoextraction, electrokinetic remediation	(Prakash, 2023; Kumar, 2024).
Arsenic (As)	Skin lesions, various cancers, cardiovascular diseases	Phytoremediation, adsorption, chemical oxidation	(Prakash, 2023; Abd Elnabi et al., 2023)
Chromium (Cr)	Respiratory issues, kidney/liver damage, skin ulcers	Bioremediation, reduction techniques	(Prakash, 2023; Kumar, 2024)
Copper (Cu)	Liver damage, gastrointestinal distress, Wilson's disease	Phytoremediation, chemical stabilization	(Prakash, 2023; Abd Elnabi et al., 2023)
Nickel (Ni)	Lung cancer, dermatitis, cardiovascular effects	Phytoextraction, soil washing	(Prakash, 2023; Kumar, 2024)
Zinc (Zn)	Gastro-intestinal distress, impaired immune function	Phytoremediation, soil washing	(Plum et al., 2010; Agnew& Slesinger, 2020)

Natural Strategies for Heavy Metal Detoxification

As shown in (Table 3), some foods and supplements may be added to the diet to complement the body's natural detoxification of heavy metals. In very severe and large cases, it is still best to consult with professional medical attention during the process of detoxifying one's body naturally. Cruciferous vegetables such as broccoli, garlic, and cilantro are significant inclusions in one's diet due to their properties that may help bind with heavy metals and ultimately discharge them from the body. Among algae, spirulina and chlorella are particularly noted for their detoxification properties. Increased consumption of dietary fiber from whole grains and legumes can decrease the absorption of heavy metals. Other herbs, such as turmeric and milk thistle, aid in promoting liver health and detoxification. Heavy metal exposure may also be reduced by water filtration using natural adsorbents, such as coconut shells and zeolites (Senanu et al., 2023).

Table 3: Natural Strategies for Detoxifying Heavy Metals

Strategy	Description	Potential Benefits	References
Cilantro	Herb known for its chelating properties	May help remove mercury and other heavy metals	(Martin et al., 2020; Chin, 2023)
Chlorella	Green algae supplement	Binds to heavy metals, supports overall detoxification	(Mehrandish et al.,2019; Merino et al.,2019)
Garlic	Sulfur-rich food	May help eliminate cadmium and lead	(Mehrandish et al., 2019; Chin, 2023)
Milk Thistle	Herb supporting liver function	Aids liver in processing and eliminating toxins	(Mehrandish et al., 2019; Chin, 2023)
Turmeric	Anti-inflammatory spice	Supports liver function, may help reduce metal toxicity	(Mehrandish et al., 2019; Chin, 2023)
Probiotics	Beneficial gut bacteria	Can bind to heavy metals in the gut, aiding elimination	(Chin, 2023)
Fiber-rich foods	e.g., fruits, vegetables, whole grains	Help bind and eliminate toxins through digestive tract	(Mehrandish et al., 2019; Chin, 2023)
Vitamin C	Antioxidant vitamin	May help reduce oxidative stress from heavy metals	(Mehrandish et al., 2019; Chin, 2023)
Selenium	Mineral	Supports glutathione production, important for detoxification	(Mehrandish et al., 2019; Chin, 2023)
Water	Increased hydration	Aids in flushing out toxins through urine	(Mehrandish et al., 2019; Chin, 2023)
Sweating	Saunas, exercise	May help eliminate some heavy metals through skin	(Mehrandish et al., 2019; Chin, 2023)

Proposed Measures to Enhance Heavy Metal Management

Based on the findings of gaps in awareness and knowledge about heavy metal toxicity, it is crucial for policymakers, educators, and health professionals to take coordinated action to mitigate the risks. Policymakers should enact stricter regulations, enforce proper disposal and treatment of hazardous waste containing heavy metals, implement policies to monitor and control heavy metal pollution from industrial activities and ship-breaking yards, and allocate funding for public awareness campaigns and educational programs on heavy metal toxicity. Educators play a vital role in incorporating lessons on heavy metal toxicity and its health effects into school curricula, developing targeted educational materials for different age groups and stakeholders, and collaborating with health professionals to organize workshops and training sessions for teachers. Health professionals should conduct regular health check-ups and blood tests for heavy metals in high-risk populations like e-waste scavengers, provide guidance and support for the treatment and management of heavy metal poisoning cases, and partner with educators and policymakers to create and disseminate educational resources on heavy metal toxicity. By taking these actions to address the gaps in awareness and knowledge, we can work towards reducing the health and environmental risks posed by heavy metal contamination in the community.

Future Research Directions

Future heavy metal research in this regard should be based on the development of a reliable monitoring system for groundwater, seasonal assessments of contamination levels, and remediation techniques, including phytoremediation and biochar. More emphasis needs to be placed on new techniques that use nanotechnology and molecular biology for detoxification and health risk assessments due to heavy metal exposure, especially with respect to vulnerable populations. Thirdly, it will be imperative to have inter- or multidisciplinary collaboration between environmental science, agronomy, chemistry, and engineering, as the complex issues of heavy metal pollution will require handling, along with the establishment of a global network for knowledge sharing.

Conclusion

Humans experience high health risks because of this simple fact: they are in contact with heavy metals, and even at a low concentration. They enter the body through multiple routes such as inhalation, ingestion and absorption through skin. Heavy metals are known to produce toxicity by triggering oxidative stress, enzyme inhibition, biological macromolecule damage and carcinogenic initiation. Heavy metal exposure is associated with various health effects related to organ dysfunction, neurologic disorders and chronic diseases. To understand the complications, on how prevention is done to reduce exposure of humans (bio magnification) and the controlling preventive measures in anthropogenic/ industrial activities that releases heavy metal into environment are indispensable.

Therefore, including the natural ways in our life to unclog these toxins is far necessary for a healthy living style.

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