Spice adulteration with lead chromate is a distinct, non-agricultural contamination pathway reaching infants

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Abstract

The wiki's corpus of heavy metal contamination in food is dominated by agricultural uptake mechanisms: arsenic in flooded paddy soils, cadmium in volcanic-origin cocoa-growing soils, mercury biomagnification in aquatic food chains. These are biogeochemical processes that respond to agronomic, processing, and formulation interventions. Spice adulteration with lead chromate is fundamentally different. It is a deliberate introduction of an industrial pigment into the food supply, driven by market incentives and enabled by regulatory gaps, and it reaches the highest-concern demographic (infants and toddlers) through processed food products that parents purchase with the expectation of safety.

1 | The mechanism

Lead chromate (PbCrO4) is among the cheapest and most widely available yellow industrial pigments globally. It is used in paints, plastics, and industrial coatings. In the turmeric supply chain across South Asia, polishers add PbCrO4-based yellow pigments to dried turmeric roots during the polishing process to enhance color, compensate for poor-quality roots, and reduce polishing time. Forsyth et al. documented through 152 interviews across the Bangladesh turmeric supply chain that this practice has persisted for more than thirty years, catalyzed by a 1988 flood that damaged turmeric crop quality and by rising imports of brighter-colored Indian turmeric that set consumer color expectations (Forsyth 2019). The practice is not clandestine; polishers openly discuss it, and yellow pigment waste bags are visible at polishing mills. None of the 43 polishers interviewed were aware that the pigments contained lead.

The diagnostic fingerprint is the molar ratio of lead to chromium. Environmental lead contamination (from soil, dust, or water) produces Pb:Cr molar ratios well below 1. Lead chromate adulteration produces ratios near 1:1,

because PbCrO4 contains one atom of each. Across 356 turmeric samples from 23 cities in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, samples with Pb concentrations above 18 µg/g had an average Pb:Cr molar ratio of 0.92 (SD 0.30), confirming lead chromate as the source; samples below 15 µg/g had ratios of 0.44 (SD 0.30), consistent with environmental contamination (Forsyth 2024).

The same deliberate-adulteration mechanism operates in other spice supply chains. The WanaBana cinnamon applesauce recall, documented by the CDC in a Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, identified lead chromate as the contaminant in cinnamon used in applesauce pouches marketed to infants and toddlers. Lead concentrations in the cinnamon reached 1.9-3.0 ppm (1,900-3,000 ppb), and 566 children were identified with elevated blood lead levels, with a median BLL of 7.2 µg/dL and a range of 3.5-39.3 µg/dL. Fifty-five percent of cases were in children under two years of age (Troeschel 2024).

2 | The scale

The most comprehensive prevalence estimate comes from a PRISMA-ScR scoping review synthesizing 48 publications and 2,235 commercial turmeric samples from 22 countries across six continents (Gafner 2026). The overall adulteration rate is 20.0% (448/2,235). One in five commercial turmeric products tested worldwide is adulterated by some mechanism, whether toxic colorants, undeclared bulking agents, species substitution, or synthetic curcumin. The rate is similar across market channels: 20.4% for turmeric sold as spice (n=1,767) and 22.0% for dietary supplements and herbal medicines (n=332).

The geographic distribution is genuinely global. Asia has the highest adulteration rate at 22.2% (328/1,478), with India alone at 16.5% (165/1,002), Pakistan at 27.0% (63/233), and Sri Lanka at 68/79 samples adulterated. Europe, with 462 samples (primarily the European Commission JRC investigation of 316 samples from 22 countries), shows 14.5% adulteration. North America shows 14.9% (25/168). South America, Africa, and Oceania have too few samples (39, 15, and 16 respectively) to draw firm conclusions, though South American data suggest rates as high as 35.9%.

The geographic pattern of adulteration types is itself a finding. Lead chromate and other toxic colorants concentrate in South Asian spice supply chains: metanil yellow was found in 15.8% of 947 Indian spice samples tested for it, and lead chromate adulteration is particularly frequent in Bihar, Assam, and the neighboring countries of Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Nepal. In Europe and North America, the dominant adulteration mechanism for turmeric supplements is synthetic curcumin sold as natural extract (17 of 82 tested supplement samples across five publications), which poses a fraud risk rather than an acute toxicity risk but indicates that supply chain integrity failures are not confined to any single region or mechanism.

Forsyth 2024 documented the concentration magnitudes that make the lead chromate pathway uniquely dangerous. Lead concentrations exceeded 1,000 µg/g (1,000 ppm) in turmeric from Patna (Bihar, India), Karachi (Pakistan), and Peshawar (Pakistan), with a maximum of 2,935 µg/g in Karachi. In Bihar, modeled child blood lead level increases from turmeric consumption alone reached 345-790 µg/L, more than ten times the CDC Blood Lead Reference Value of 35 µg/L. In Karachi, the modeled increase was 173-396 µg/L (Forsyth 2024).

The Bangladesh supply chain investigation found PbCrO4-based pigment adulteration in seven of nine major turmeric-producing districts, with yellow pigment samples containing a median of 20,024 µg/g Pb and a maximum of 115,500 µg/g (11.55% Pb by weight). Soil around polishing mills contained up to 4,257 µg/g Pb, creating secondary environmental contamination (Forsyth 2019).

Critically, the contamination reaches US consumers. A survey of 127 ground turmeric products from US retail outlets found mean Pb of 1,410 ppb (1.41 µg/g), median 1,120 ppb, and a maximum of 7,590 ppb (7.59 µg/g), despite FDA Import Alert 99-42 mandating detention of Pb-contaminated spice imports (Lech 2020, FDA IA 99-42). The 7,590 ppb maximum in a retail product is 76 times the FDA action level of 100 ppb.

Independent epidemiological evidence from the Republic of Georgia confirms spice consumption as a Pb exposure vector beyond the South Asian supply chain context. Among 1,635 Georgian children aged 5-7 years, spice use was an independent predictor of elevated blood lead levels (OR approximately 1.47), with 39.8% of children having BLL at or above 3.5 µg/dL (Rylander 2025).

3 | Enforcement works: the Bangladesh case

The most significant finding in the Gafner 2026 review for regulatory audiences is the Bangladesh enforcement success story. Following publication of the Forsyth 2019 supply chain investigation linking lead chromate adulteration to elevated blood lead levels in rural Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Food Safety Authority implemented a coordinated intervention: declared turmeric adulteration a prosecutable act, imposed fines on traders found treating turmeric with lead-containing dyes, deployed handheld XRF analyzers to field-test turmeric for lead and chromium at markets and mills, and conducted educational campaigns warning consumers, traders, and polishers about the health consequences of lead in food. The result was rapid and measurable: lead-contaminated turmeric samples dropped from 47% in 2019, to 5% in early 2020, to 2.3% in fall 2020, to 0% in early 2021 (Forsyth et al. 2023, cited in Gafner 2026). This is the strongest documented case in the wiki's corpus of a regulatory intervention producing near-complete elimination of a specific contamination mechanism within two years. The implication is that deliberate adulteration, unlike biogeochemical contamination, is tractable through enforcement if the political will and field-testing infrastructure exist.

4 | Why this is distinct from other contamination pathways

Three properties distinguish spice adulteration from the agricultural contamination mechanisms that dominate the rest of the wiki.

First, the contamination is deliberate, not incidental. Agricultural uptake of arsenic in rice or cadmium in cocoa is a consequence of soil chemistry and plant biology that no actor in the supply chain intends. Spice adulteration with lead chromate is a human decision, made by identifiable actors (polishers, middlemen) at identifiable points in the supply chain (polishing mills), for identifiable economic reasons (color enhancement, reduced polishing time, compensation for poor root quality). This means that the contamination is, in principle, eliminable by intervention at a single control point, rather than requiring ecosystem-level remediation.

Second, the concentration magnitudes are orders of magnitude higher than agricultural contamination. The worst-case agricultural Pb concentrations in the wiki's corpus are in the tens to low hundreds of ppb in food matrices. Adulterated turmeric reaches 2,935,000 ppb (2,935 µg/g) in the Forsyth 2024 data, and the pigments themselves reach 115,500,000 ppb (115,500 µg/g). The WanaBana cinnamon reached 1,900-3,000 ppb. These concentrations are in a different risk category from anything the agricultural contamination literature documents.

Third, the pathway bypasses agricultural mitigation entirely. Soil amendments, water management, cultivar selection, processing controls, and formulation dilution are the levers the wiki documents for agricultural heavy metal contamination. None of these apply to deliberate adulteration with an industrial chemical. The only effective levers are supply-chain testing at ingredient intake and supplier qualification that traces spice origin and processing history.

5 | Implications for risk management

Any food product containing turmeric, cinnamon, or other spices carries a Pb risk that is categorically different from the agricultural risks the rest of the wiki addresses. The risk cannot be managed by sourcing from "clean" agricultural regions or by processing interventions, because the adulteration is episodic, geographically variable, and invisible to visual inspection. The only documented effective control points are Pb testing of incoming spice material and supplier qualification that traces spice origin and processing history. The WanaBana recall demonstrates the consequence of not testing: 566 documented cases of childhood lead poisoning from a single product line.

For regulators, FDA Import Alert 99-42 has been active since the 1990s, yet US retail turmeric still contains Pb up to 76 times the action level (Lech 2020). The gap between the existence of an enforcement mechanism and its effectiveness on the ground is itself a finding. The Forsyth 2024 data showing that the practice spans at least four countries and has persisted for decades despite periodic enforcement actions suggests that import-level interdiction alone is insufficient without supply-chain-level intervention in producing countries.

For educators, spice adulteration is the clearest case study in the corpus of a non-agricultural contamination mechanism. The contrast with soil-uptake pathways is pedagogically useful: it demonstrates that "heavy metals in food" is not synonymous with "heavy metals in soil and water," and that the contamination landscape includes deliberate human decisions driven by market incentives.

6 | Open questions

Whether other spice supply chains (chili pepper, paprika, saffron) carry the same $PbCrO_4$ adulteration risk is not yet documented in the corpus at the same evidence level as turmeric and cinnamon. The Gafner 2026 review notes that natural colorants including paprika and chili powders are themselves used as turmeric adulterants, which suggests overlapping supply chain vulnerabilities but does not document lead chromate adulteration in those spice supply chains independently.

The supplement-channel finding from Gafner 2026 opens a distinct question: synthetic curcumin adulteration of turmeric dietary supplements appears to be the dominant adulteration mode in Europe and North America, with rates reaching 27.1% in supplements (vs 9.7% in spices) when analysis is restricted to validated methods. While synthetic curcumin does not carry the same acute toxicity risk as lead chromate, it represents a systematic market-integrity failure that the wiki's existing supplement contamination thread (the nascent dietary-supplement Pb candidate in synthesis-proposals.md) should track alongside the heavy-metal adulteration pathway.

The Bangladesh enforcement success (47% to 0% in two years) raises the question of whether the same intervention model (field XRF, prosecutable-act declaration, fines, education) is replicable in Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka, where adulteration rates remain high. No comparable enforcement data from those jurisdictions has entered the corpus.

Lead-based paints as a contamination vector for food contact surfaces (distinct from spice adulteration but sharing the non-agricultural, deliberate-introduction mechanism) is a parallel thread that the wiki has not yet surfaced with dedicated source coverage.

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STATUS AND LICENCE

Editorially reviewed in-house; no external peer review has been completed on this finding. Published as a preprint with its review state tracked on the article page. Released under CC BY 4.0.

COMPETING INTERESTS

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DATA AVAILABILITY

Every source behind this finding is listed with its own extraction record at https://heavymetalindex.com/synthesis/-spice-adulteration-lead-infants#sources, each linking to the ingest receipt, the extracted values, and the file hash of the document it was built from.

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