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Pender County Health Department Health Advisory

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The PCHD Warns Public of Potential for Skin Damage Caused by Temporary “Black Henna” Tattoos

Advisory Summary

- Black Henna paint on tattoos may cause severe skin reactions
- Health Care Providers should report skin reactions associated with Black Henna “tattoos” to the PCHD at 259-1231.

Background Information

Recently the PCHD was notified of four children who had experienced severe and widespread skin rashes requiring medical treatment after receiving “black henna” temporary tattoos while visiting Surf City, NC.

Henna, a coloring made from a plant, is approved for use as a hair dye only and not for direct application to the skin, according to the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Furthermore, some henna tattoos that are being marketed in the US contain a product called p-phenylenediamine (PPD). A petroleum derivative, this dye can be added to the paste used in temporary tattoos to produce a darker shaded image known as a “black henna tattoo”. When applied to the skin, this ingredient may cause allergic reactions in some individuals, such as intense itching, redness of the skin, swelling and permanent hypo pigmentation or scarring at the tattoo site. If eyes are exposed to PPD, it may lead to severe eye damage. There may also be long-term serious health effects associated with the use of this chemical. These are referred to as “temporary tattoos” because the dye is not injected into the skin.

PCHD Recommendations Regarding Potential Risk

Hoping to prevent additional cases of skin-damaging reactions to black henna tattoos, the PCHD has advised all businesses using PPD in the tattooing process to discontinue the practice. This warning is to advise businesses, residents, and visitors of their risks. The practice of using black henna for paint on tattoos has been documented in other coastal communities in North Carolina and in surrounding states.

Visitors and residents are urged to consider potential risks before having any type of tattoo applied to their skin. Persons who experience any adverse skin reactions to a tattoo should seek immediate medical attention. Incidents should be reported to the Pender County Health Department.

This alert is not associated with “decal” type tattoos that are applied to the skin with a moistened cotton ball. This type of tattoo fades several days after application.