Thrown for a loss by lead
Tests of artificial turf surfaces raise concerns about toxic metal

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No pesticides are needed for artificial turf, so say goodbye to the controversy over chemical exposures, right? Not so quick.

Last month, the New Jersey Department of Health found potentially harmful dust on two artificial fields, both AstroTurf brand fields. The playing surfaces had lead levels eight to 10 times above the state's residential soil standard for cleanup of contaminated properties. The fields were closed, and one New York field near Syracuse was closed for testing.

Some schools have installed artificial turf to keep overused fields playable.

"With the wear and tear on these fields, you can't keep up with adequate playing conditions," said Doug Kenyon, executive director of Section 2 of the New York State Public High School Athletes Association.

One benefit, both financially and environmentally, was that turf wiped out the need for chemicals. Artificial turf has been installed locally at high schools in Amsterdam, Broadalbin and Johnstown, and is coming soon to Glens Falls, Stillwater, Shenendehowa in Clifton Park and Columbia in East Greenbush.

"Over the long haul, they are probably comparable (financially), and there's a lot less maintenance," Kenyon said.

But what about the lead?

On some styles of turf, pigment containing lead chromate is infused in the nylon surface to keep it green.

"Lead chromate is relatively insoluble, which basically means that it's not going to come apart and it's not easily available," said Ralph Buncher, an epidemiologist and biostatistician at the University of Cincinnati.

It is unknown if the lead can be inhaled or ingested and stored in the body, or whether it passes harmlessly through the body. New Jersey is testing the material to find out, and Buncher is discussing additional research with the artificial turf industry. Kenyon said he didn't know of any Capital Region fields being tested for lead.

The New Jersey playing fields that contained lead were installed years ago, and lead-free alternatives are now available.
"I wouldn't worry about it right now," Buncher said. "Lead is not the sort of thing that you eat it one day and you are poisoned. It's a long-term phenomenon and therefore, unless your kid is out there rolling in the field six days a week, I wouldn't get terrible excited about it."