



Preventing Lead Poisoning

Until the 1970s, lead was commonly used in paint, water pipes, gasoline, and pottery. Although not used as much today, lead does not decompose. That means it must be removed or covered to render it harmless. Lead paint that is in good condition (not flaking or peeling) is not an immediate problem, but it may be a hazard if it begins to peel.

Less common sources of lead are imported foods, toys made outside the United States, and some jewelry. People who work with lead or have hobbies that involve the use of lead (such as stained glass) may bring the substance home on their clothing.

Exposure to too much lead can be dangerous. In a child, lead poisoning can result in learning disabilities, a lower IQ (intelligence quotient), a slower growth rate, and behavioral problems that are lifelong.

How can lead poison a child?

Small bits of paint can come off windowsills, doors, and walls, and a child may put these pieces in his/her mouth during normal hand-to-mouth activity. Other children are exposed to lead by sucking their thumbs or fingers after they have touched dust from lead paint. Also, many old porches are painted with lead paint. By walking across the porch, lead paint dust is picked up on shoes and tracked into the house. Lead dust can also be inhaled.

Why should your child be tested for lead?

A level of lead circulating in the blood that is equal to or higher than a measurement of 10 micrograms is considered elevated. The only way to tell if your child's lead level is too high is by having his/her blood tested. In the early stages of lead poisoning, most young children do not have any symptoms. Once in the body, though, lead begins to replace calcium in the bones, interfere with the manufacture of red blood cells, and attack parts of the nervous system and brain.

If the blood test determines that your child's level of lead is high, the pediatrician will speak with you about the treatments and other measures that are available to lower that level. Don't hesitate to ask questions of the pediatrician about this serious problem so that you can take an active part in keeping your child safe and healthy!

Does your home have lead?

If your home was built before 1950, it is very likely that it has lead paint. In 1978, lead was removed from paint sold for use in homes. Homes built between 1950 and 1978 were sometimes contaminated by the use of older, lead-based paints. And, homes built before the 1920s may still have lead water pipes.

How can you protect your child from lead?

- Wash your child's hands and face often with soap and water, especially before eating.
- Remove shoes before entering your home.
- Minimize the amount of lead dust in your home by using a wet mop and by wet dusting all your furniture, windows, and floors at least once a week. You can use cleaners with phosphates such as automatic dishwasher detergent. Carpets can be vacuumed with a HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) vacuum; these vacuums are designed to pick up fine particles.
- Do not do remodeling work on your home while children and pregnant mothers are there. Remodeling older homes can cause lead paint to contaminate your home. Sanding woodwork, sandblasting, and torching paint can cause high amounts of lead in your home. Contact your local Health Department for advice on the safest way to remove lead paint.
- Do not allow your child to play in the soil. Soil closest to your home can contain lead paint chips and dust if the outside of your home has lead paint. If your home is near a highway, the soil may have lead from car exhaust from the days when gasoline contained lead. Provide a sandbox outside or plant grass for your child to play in. Mulch can cover the soil closest to your home.
- Allow cold water to run 20 seconds in the morning to flush the pipes before using the water to drink or prepare food. This is necessary because water pipes may be made with lead or joined with lead solder; water that flows through them (especially hot water) may contain lead.
- Feed your child a healthy diet. A child who does not get an adequate amount of calcium and iron in his/her diet is more likely to absorb lead when exposed to it. Making sure your child gets enough of these nutrients and giving him/her a daily chewable vitamin can lower how much lead his/her body takes in. Foods high in iron include red meats, beans, iron-enriched cereals, and green leafy vegetables. Young children should have four daily servings of foods containing calcium such as milk, yogurt, and cheese.