

LEAD EXPOSURE AND POISONING

The Law

Public Health Law requires that public schools, day care providers and nursery schools "obtain evidence" of lead screening for all children under six years of age. If the parent/guardian is unable to provide such evidence, the district must give the parent information on lead poisoning and prevention, and refer the parent/guardian to their child's health care provider or the county health department for a lead blood screening.

Information for Parents/Guardians

If you have young children, it's important to find out whether there is any risk that they might be exposed to lead, especially if you live in an older home.

Long-term exposure to lead, a naturally occurring metal used in everything from construction materials to batteries, can cause serious health problems, particularly in young children. Lead is toxic to everyone, but unborn babies and young children are at greatest risk for health problems from lead poisoning because their smaller, growing bodies make them more susceptible to absorbing and retaining lead.

Unsafe levels of lead in blood can lead to a wide range of symptoms, from headaches and stomach pain to behavioral problems and anemia. Lead can also affect a child's developing brain.

Talk to your child's health care provider about potential lead sources in your house or anywhere your child spends long periods of time. It is important for children to get tested for lead exposure at age 1 and again at age 2, as many with lead poisoning don't show any symptoms.

Effects of Lead Poisoning

- Decreased bone and muscle growth
- Poor muscle coordination
- Damage to the nervous system, kidneys, and/or hearing
- Speech and language problems
- Developmental delay
- Seizures and unconsciousness (in cases of extremely high lead levels)

Sources of Lead Poisoning

Most commonly, young children get lead poisoning from lead-based paint, which was used in many U.S. homes until the late 1970s, when the dangers of lead became known and the government banned the manufacture of paint containing lead. That's why children who live in older homes are at a greater risk for lead poisoning.

Also at risk are those who immigrate to the United States or are adopted from a foreign country that doesn't regulate the use of lead.

Lead is also found in other environmental areas, including:

- Contaminated soil, which is found near busy streets, in part because lead was an ingredient in gasoline until the late 1970s. The soil that surrounds homes that were painted with lead-based paint may be contaminated too. Contaminated soil is a particular concern because it can also introduce lead dust into the home.
- Water that flows through old lead pipes or faucets, if the pipes begin to break down
- Food stored in bowls glazed or painted with lead, or imported from countries that use lead to seal canned food

- Some toys, jewelry, hobby, and sports objects (like stained glass, ink, paint, and plaster)
- Some folk or home remedies, such as greta and azarcon (used to treat an upset stomach)

Symptoms of Lead Poisoning

Many children with lead poisoning don't show any signs of being sick, so it's important to eliminate lead risks at home and to have your young child tested for lead exposure.

When children do develop symptoms of lead poisoning, they usually appear as:

- Irritability, behavioral problems, difficulty with concentration
- Pica (eating of nonnutritious things such as dirt and paint chips)
- Headaches
- Loss of appetite, weight loss
- Sluggishness or fatigue
- Abdominal pain
- Vomiting or nausea
- Constipation
- Pallor (pale skin)
- Metallic taste in mouth
- Muscle and joint weakness or pain
- Seizures

These symptoms may also indicate a wide variety of other illnesses, so if your child has any of them, talk to your child's health care provider. A blood test may be necessary to look for lead poisoning or other health problems.

Protecting Your Child

You can protect your child from lead poisoning by ensuring that your home is lead-free. Have your child tested for lead exposure, particularly if s/he is between 6 months and 3 years old. Children this age spend a lot of time on the floor and trying to put things in their mouths.

These tips can help you reduce the risk of lead exposure:

- **Be wary of old plumbing.** Old plumbing might be lined with lead. If you have an old plumbing system (in homes built before 1970), let cold water run from the faucet for a minute before drinking it. Because hot water absorbs more lead than cold water, don't use hot tap water for meals.
- **Keep your home and your family clean.** Wash your child's hands and toys frequently, and keep dusty surfaces clean with a wet cloth.
- **Ensure that iron and calcium are in your diets.** If your child is exposed to lead, good nutrition can reduce the amount that will actually be absorbed inside the body. Eating regular meals is helpful because lead is absorbed more during fasting.
- **Know where your child plays.** Keep your child away from busy roads and the underside of bridges.

If you suspect that you might have lead-based paint on your walls, use a wet cloth to wipe windowsills and walls. Watch out for water damage that can make paint peel. Sanding or heating lead-based paint is a bad idea because these increase the risk that lead will be inhaled. If the paint doesn't have many chips, a new layer of paint, paneling, or drywall will probably reduce the risk. It's best to consult a professional, especially because other precautions may need to be taken to contain the lead in the paint.