

Lead Is a Poison: What You Need to Know

Lead in the body can affect child development and behavior. Lead is a metal that is found in a lot of places. Although you can't usually see lead, you can do things to prevent your child from being exposed to it. No safe level of lead has been identified for children. Children have the most risk factors because they often put their hands and objects into their mouths and their growing bodies tend to easily absorb what they eat. Here is information from the American Academy of Pediatrics to help parents understand how lead can be harmful, where it may be found, and what they can do to keep their children safe.

How Lead Is Harmful

Lead can interfere with typical growth and development and affect almost every system of the body, including the brain.

- Some children show learning and behavior problems. These may be seen first during the preschool years or later.
- Physical symptoms may include stomach pain, headaches, vomiting, and a feeling of weakness. Very high levels of lead in the body may cause seizures, coma, and death.

Note: Because most children with lead in their blood show no symptoms, lead screenings are important.

Where Lead Can Be Found

- **Homes and buildings.** Lead was added to indoor and outdoor paint until 1978. When lead-based paint surfaces rub together (like when a window is opened or a door is closed) or when paint begins to peel or chip, the lead can get into the dust and dirt in and around the home.
- **Hobby materials** (stained glass, paints, solders, fishing weights, and buckshot).
- **Home remedies** (azarcon and greta, which are used for upset stomach or indigestion; pay-loo-ah, which is used for rash or fever).
- **Workplaces** (foundries, smelteries, battery recycling plants, and auto repair shops).
- **Food bowls painted with lead glazes**, especially if made in another country or old.
- **Sometimes in products** like toys, jewelry, or furniture, especially if made in another country.
- **Water that has been in contact with lead pipes, lead solder, or older plumbing fixtures**, especially hot water pipes because hot water absorbs lead more quickly than cold water.

What You Can Do

- **Test your home for lead.** If your home was built before 1978, talk with your local health department about getting your home tested for lead. If you don't know how old your home is, assume there is lead. In the United States, lead is in paint in 87% of homes built before 1940, 69% of homes built from 1940 to 1959, and 24% of homes built from 1960 to 1977. Homes in the Northeast and Midwest are most likely to have lead in paint. Ask the landlord (property owner) about lead before you sign a lease. Before you buy a home, have it inspected for lead.
- **Before any work is done on your home, learn about safe ways to make repairs.** When repairs are being made, seal off the area until the job is done and keep your child away until everything is cleaned up. Be sure to use a certified contractor. Removing lead paint on your own can often make the condition worse. If work is not done safely, you and your child can be harmed by increased exposure to lead in dust.
- **Keep your children away from old windows, old porches, and areas with chipping or peeling paint.** If this paint is in your home, cover it with duct tape or contact paper until it can be completely removed. If you rent

your home, let your landlord know about any peeling or chipping paint. A landlord is legally required to repair lead problems found on their property.

- **Do not allow your child to play in the dirt next to your old home.** Plant grass over bare soil, or use mulch or wood chips.
- **Clean your home regularly.** Wipe down floors and other level surfaces with a damp mop or sponge. Taking shoes off at the door can help reduce tracking in dirt.
- **Teach your children to wash their hands, especially before eating.** Wash pacifiers and toys regularly.
- **Keep clean.** If your work or hobbies involve lead, change your clothes and shoes and shower when finished. Keep your clothes at work, or wash your work clothes as soon as possible.
- **Use cold flushed tap water for mixing baby formula, drinking, or cooking.** If you are in an older home, run the water for several minutes before using it in the morning and start with cold water for drinking or cooking.
- **Eat healthy.** Give your child a well-balanced diet that includes breakfast and food high in calcium and iron. A good diet can help your child absorb less lead.

Treatment of Lead Poisoning

The first action is to identify the source of exposure to lead and prevent further exposure. Some children with high levels of lead in their blood need to take a medicine that helps their body get rid of it faster. If your child's lead level is too high, it can take months to years for it to come down; close follow-up is needed. Children with development or behavior problems should be evaluated and, if needed, receive services to help them improve.

Lead Screening

The only way to know whether your child has been exposed to lead is with a blood test. Screening tests for lead usually include blood taken from the finger, but when doctors suspect lead poisoning, it is more accurate for these tests to include blood taken from a vein in the arm. The test measures the amount of lead in the blood. If you think that your child has been exposed to lead, talk with your child's doctor about getting a blood test to check for lead.

For More Information

- American Academy of Pediatrics
www.aap.org and www.HealthyChildren.org
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program
www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead
- US Environmental Protection Agency
www.epa.gov/lead
- US Department of Housing and Urban Development
www.hud.gov/lead

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