

LEAD POISONING

What is lead and how does lead affect your children?

Lead is a heavy metal, a natural element found throughout the environment. It is toxic to the human body in almost any amount, especially to fetuses and young children 6 years of age and under. They absorb up to five times more lead into their systems than adults. Children can get lead poisoning by swallowing or inhaling lead. Lead poisoning can cause learning disabilities, hyperactivity, impaired hearing, mental retardation and stunted growth in young children. Sometimes the illness caused by lead poisoning cannot be cured.

How do children get lead poisoning?

Children most at risk for lead poisoning live in houses and apartments built before 1978, when large amounts of lead were used in paint. Lead paint tastes sweet. Young children can get lead poisoning by ingesting leaded dirt and dust from paint. Children can also get lead poisoning by playing in dirt next to busy street where lead from gasoline remains. Moreover, children whose diets are low in iron and calcium tend to absorb more lead.

Common sources of lead include:

- Lead paint in old buildings
- Ceramic ware, especially imported or hand painted ones such as “longevity” sets. (Source: Hawaii State Department of Health, Environmental Health Administration) Iron woks, pots and pans are lead free.
- Crystal glassware
- Lead painted old toys, cribs and some new toys from foreign countries which may contain lead
- Work clothes (if lead is used at workplace)
- Hobby materials such as glue and artist’s paints
- Leaded gasoline
- Car batteries

- Some drinking water (lead from old pipes, faucets and soldered joints may dissolve into the water). Water filters may not remove lead, especially carbon, sand and cartridge filters.

How do you know if your children have lead poisoning?

Lead poisoned children usually do not show any symptoms. When they do, many symptoms can easily be mistaken for colds or the flu, like stomachaches, diarrhea, vomiting, fatigue, headaches or lack of sleep. The only way to know for sure is to have children take a blood test.

How can you reduce the risk of lead poisoning?

- If your house or apartment was built before 1978, or if you plan to renovate your home, contact the Health Department and have the paint tested for lead. To properly remove lead paint, contact the Lead-Related Construction Information line at 1-800-597-LEAD (5323) for a qualified contractor. Don’t try to remove lead paint yourself.
- Move cribs and playpens away from damaged paint.
- Make sure children do not chew on anything covered with lead paint, such as painted windowsills and cribs.
- Keep children away from car exhausts, playing near busy streets, automotive garages and gasoline stations.
- If you work with lead, leave your clothes at work and wash them separately from the rest of the laundry.
- Remove imported vinyl (plastic) mini-blinds manufactured before 1996, as they were made with lead, which becomes a hazardous dust on the surface of the blinds.

- Store food in glass or plastic containers, not in painted dishes or pottery as lead may leach into the food.
- Use only cold water in food preparation. If the cold water hasn't been used for more than a few hours, let it run for 15-30 seconds before drinking it or cooking with it. Hot water from the faucet contains a higher level of lead.
- Wash children's hands before each meal, snack and bedtime.
- Feed children a balanced diet (regular meals and snacks; foods high in calcium such as milk and dairy products; foods high in iron such as meat, poultry, and dark green leafy vegetables). A healthy diet slows down the body's absorption of lead.
- Wash toys and pacifiers frequently.
- Clean floors, window frames, window sills, and other surfaces weekly. Use a mop, sponge, or paper towel and a general all-purpose cleaner or a cleaner made specifically for lead such as a high phosphate solution (e.g. TSP) available at hardware stores. You should test your dishes for lead. You can purchase a testing kit from hardware stores and pharmacies.

Who should be tested for lead poisoning?

The Public Health Department recommends that all children six and under be screened regularly and tested at least when they are 1 and 2 years old.

Where can children be tested?

- Your family doctor or pediatrician can order a blood test for lead.
- Your local health department's Child Health and Disability Program (CHDP) provides free testing for eligible children through age 18.

For more information, contact:
Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA)
Drinking Water Hotline 1-800-426-4791
Website: www.epa.gov/lead
National Lead Information Center
1-800-424-LEAD (5323)