

WMRC Factsheet

Lead Paint

Whether you're moving into an old house that needs a bit of renovation or just notice your house needs a new look, you have to be aware of lead paint. While adults are relatively unaffected by lead, an estimated 1 in 9 American children have elevated lead levels in their blood. This factsheet gives an overview of lead's health effects, steps to reduce risks from lead paint, and resources to contact for further information.

The Hazards of Lead

Children of 6 are more vulnerable to lead because they absorb up to 50% of lead ingested; their bodies mistake lead for calcium and absorb it into both soft tissue and bones. Adults absorb as little as 8% of ingested lead. Children are also more likely to put things in their mouths, from chips to lead dust-contaminated fingers. Lead exposure has been linked to delayed mental development, low IQ, hearing loss, speech and language disabilities, and poor attention spans. These effects are irreversible.

Studies have linked low doses of lead ingestion to hypertension and to slower reactions and poor eye-hand coordination in adults. Higher doses of lead have caused anemia in children. In doses higher still, lead has caused comas, convulsions, irreparable intellectual and behavioral impairment, and even death in children. Lead can also affect the fetus, causing birth defects, spontaneous abortions, or stillbirths.

Children routinely exposed to lead may have stomach aches, headaches, insomnia, and a poor appetite. Or they may be cranky, restless, and tired—but not necessarily. A child can show no symptoms at all. Only a blood test can determine whether a child has lead poisoning. A child with a lead level of 10 or more micrograms per deciliter, less than 1/2,500 of a gram per gallon, is considered to have lead poisoning.

Do You Have Lead Paint?

Everyone is exposed to lead in food, in air, and in water. Lead paint, however, has higher concentrations of the metal. Lead was banned from house paint in 1978, so any house built or painted after that date should pose little or no risk.

A house built or painted before 1978 can be tested for lead paint as well as the concentration of lead present, if any. The older the house, the more likely it will have higher concentrations of lead.

The condition of the paint is also important. If it's not chipping or peeling and is out of the reach of children, it should be left alone. Like asbestos, it's safer if it stays where it is. The danger of lead comes with paint peeling and flaking off woodwork or walls.

And the danger is not always so obvious. Lead paint on window frames may be ground into dust from the friction of opening and closing the window. The dust can get in the air and be inhaled or settle on furniture, food, or toys and be ingested.

Action to Prevent Lead Problems

Test houses built or painted before 1978 for lead. If the house does have lead paint that is peeling or is in dust:

- ◆ Have children tested for blood lead levels. Ten micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood is not an immediate cause for concern, but the child should be tested again in three months. If the level hasn't gone down by then, find the source of lead and remove it.
- ◆ Make sure children wash their hands frequently and before eating.

- ◆ Foods high in iron and calcium, like lean meat, eggs, potatoes, fruit, and cheese help remove lead from a child's system. Fatty and oily or fried foods help retain lead.
- ◆ Clean up chipping and peeling paint, both inside and out, and dispose of it.
- ◆ Clean up leaded dust on window sills and the floor near woodwork. Use a damp cloth and a cleanser.
- ◆ Wash your children's toys often. Throw away any toys with lead paint. Toy manufacturers outside the U.S. may still use lead paint.

If Lead is Already a Problem...

Do all of the above, and:

- ◆ Take your child to a doctor for a physical exam and have the child screened each year for lead.
- ◆ Place duct tape over loose paint as a stop-gap measure.
- ◆ Cover hard-to-clean surfaces with contact paper. The leaded dust that collects there can simply be thrown away with the paper.

If You Want to Get the Lead Out...

- ◆ Don't if it's in good condition. A fresh coat of non-lead paint over it would lower the potential risks even more than leaving it untouched (trying to remove it would put lead containing dust into the air, as well as be a disposal problem.)
- ◆ If it needs to be removed, have a professional contractor do it, if possible. Avoid the contractor who says you can live in your house while the work is being done or who won't test for lead after the job is done. Your local health department may have a list of recommended contractors. If not, try the regional office of the Department of Housing and Urban Development.
- ◆ If you remove the paint yourself, scrape it off, catching the chips on a drop cloth. The floors and walls should be washed thoroughly. Keep children and pregnant women out of the area until clean-up is complete. Don't vacuum up dust and chips; that may kick up dust and spread it to other parts of the house. Adults get lead poisoning, too, so wear a dust mask.

- ◆ Furniture, toys, appliances, eating utensils, etc. should be removed from the area, covered or sealed in plastic.
- ◆ The best time to remove the paint is when the house is unoccupied.

If removing exterior lead paint:

- ◆ Seal all windows and vents so dust can't get inside.
- ◆ Take off your shoes before going inside so you don't track dust in.
- ◆ To remove paint chips and dust outside, hose off sides of buildings, porches, etc., scrub with a stiff brush and soapy water, and rinse clean.

Be aware that scraping is not always effective; some lead paint may stay behind. If possible, replace lead-painted window sills and moldings.

Remember, lead poisoning's effects are irreversible, but lead poisoning itself is easy to detect and completely preventable. Don't ignore it. It doesn't take much lead exposure to irreversibly damage a child.

For Further Information

Illinois Department of Public Health's Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program
217/782-0403
www.idph.state.il.us

For a general information packet, contact the National Lead Information Center:
1-800-LEAD-FYI
www.nsc.org/ehc/lead.htm

For detailed information or questions, you can call the National Lead Information Center's Clearinghouse and speak with a specialist Monday-Friday from 8:30 to 5:00 ET at 1-800-424-LEAD or 202-833-1071.