



# Fact sheet

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## Lead Poisoning and Your Child's Health

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Besides loving care and good nutrition, your baby needs other things to grow into the best possible person that he or she can be. One thing that the parent must provide is protection from the many dangers that threaten the child's health and safety. Some of these dangers cannot be seen so easily. One is lead poisoning. This problem occurs in many children, especially those living in older buildings which have lead paint. Even very small amounts of lead can prevent the young child's

brain from growing normally. This can cause learning, behavioral, and other problems as well. Lead also causes serious health problems in adults. Recently, health officials lowered the safety threshold for blood lead concentration, because of better evidence of the harm caused by even small amounts of lead. Since there are usually no signs of this poisoning until after the child has been harmed, parents need to learn about lead poisoning and how to detect it.

### What is lead?

Lead is a metal that is poisonous if eaten. In solid form, it is commonly used as fishing weights. Lead compounds were used to make indoor and outdoor paint until the late 1970's. Since then its use in paint has been prohibited. In most homes built before this time, painted surfaces probably contain lead.

### How does lead poisoning happen?

For most infants and young children who have elevated lead concentrations in their bodies, leaded paint in older homes is the main source. Some children actually eat lead-containing paint chips, which taste sweet. Others ingest it in the form of dust by breathing or when hands and other objects are put in the mouth. Lead-contaminated dust is produced when paint chips are walked upon, and when soil

(tainted by exterior lead paint or auto emissions) is brought inside. During renovation, scraping and sanding of lead-painted surfaces can cause major problems.

### What are the effects of lead poisoning?

In most cases lead can cause serious problems before the child appears to be sick. Once lead enters the body, it tends to stay there. Continued exposure causes higher and higher levels in the body.

Lead can harm many organs and tissues in the body, including kidneys and red blood cells. It can also harm the brain and nervous system. In high doses, lead can cause convulsions and death. This is not so common, however. More children are exposed to low doses of lead, resulting in behavioral problems, lowered intelligence, and difficulty in



learning. By the time these problems appear, damage to the child can be difficult or impossible to correct.

## **How can I tell if my child has lead poisoning?**

The only way to identify lead poisoning is with a blood test. The most important time to test a child for lead is between the ages of 1 and 3 years. Testing can be done by your doctor or health clinic. This is especially important if you live in a building that was built prior to the late-1970's.

## **What can I do to reduce my child's risk of lead poisoning?**

The risk is high in older homes. There are some simple things that parents can do to lower their children's exposure to lead. Clean up any paint chips, and don't let children chew on window sills or other painted objects. Dust in homes with lead-based paint may be a much more widespread problem than was previously thought. Therefore, a careful cleanup to remove the dust can reduce exposure. Use rags dampened with water containing a high phosphate cleaner, such as TSP or dishwasher powder.

According to recent research, the highest levels of lead dust are usually found at the bottom of window frames. This dust results from the scraping action while opening and closing windows. For this reason, the window frame and sill should be wiped last when the home is damp-mopped to control

dust. Otherwise, wiping may actually carry lead from the windows, adding it to other surfaces. Since nearby soils tainted by lead can be tracked into the house, it is a good idea to repeat the damp-mop procedure every couple of weeks.

If painting projects are scheduled for the home, remember that sanding or removal of paint should be avoided, except by people trained in the cleanup of lead-based paint.

## **What are some other sources of lead poisoning?**

This sheet describes the most common, prevalent sources of lead poisoning. In special circumstances, other sources may have major importance. These less-common sources of lead intake include:

- leaded crystal and improperly fired ceramics and pottery (especially if used to store food or drink)
- hobby use of lead (e.g. stained glass)
- drinking water (lead can come from solder, old pipes, or fixtures; some well waters may contain lead)
- occupational exposures (contaminated dust can also be brought into the home on workers' clothing)

Reference: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Comprehensive and Workable Plan for the Abatement of Lead-Based Paint in Privately Owned Housing. Washington, D.C., 1990.