

# Lead

## Should You Be Concerned?

**L**ead poisoning is one of the most serious health threats for children in and around the home. Your children can be poisoned if they get lead in their bodies. Lead may cause learning and behavior problems. It may damage hearing and the nervous system, including the brain.

### **Where Does Lead Come From?**

Lead was used in paint, water pipes, gasoline, pottery, and other places. Even though this metal is not used as much anymore, it still remains in places it was used.

The paint on your walls and windowsills may have lead in it. Household dust (from old, worn paint) may have lead in it. Your drinking water may have lead in it from your water pipes or the solder that joins pipes together. Even the soil outside your home may have lead in it.

It is very important to find out if your home has lead in or around it. There are tests that will let you know and they don't cost a lot.

### **How Can Lead Poison your Child?**

There are many ways. Young children put their hands and everything else in their mouths, so they can eat the dust or chips of lead-based paint without knowing it. Even bits of paint too small to see can come off windows, doors, and walls, creating lead dust. Children who crawl on the floor, put toys in their mouths, or play in soil around their home or daycare can be poisoned.

Children with too much lead in their bodies may not look or feel sick. A simple blood test is the only way to know if your child is being exposed to lead. Ask your doctor or health care provider to test your child for lead.

Lead paint that is in good shape is not an immediate problem. It may be a risk in the future though.

Laws have been passed to ban lead in household paint, gasoline and water pipes. However, many older homes still have lead in them. Finding out if lead is a problem in your home is the first step in protecting your children's health. The questions on the next page can help.



**One out of every nine American children has too much lead in their bodies. The rate of lead poisoning is even higher in cities.**

**Dust from lead paint is the biggest threat to young children.**

## Questions to Ask

- Do you live in an older home? Many older homes have lead-based paint or lead water pipes. Lead paint was banned in 1978. Homes built before 1950 are most likely to have lead in paint and water pipes.
- Is there cracking, chipping, or flaking paint in your home?
- Are there places where paint is being rubbed, such as on a door or in a window frame? This can make dust that has lead in it.
- Do you have water pipes made with lead or joined with lead solder? Water that flows through them may contain lead. Lead pipes are dull gray and scratch easily with a key or penny.
- Has your home been recently remodeled or renovated? Projects may leave dust or paint chips with lead.
- Is there lead in the soil outside your home? It may have gotten there from paint on the outside of the building or from industry. Or it may have come from car exhaust from the days when gasoline contained lead. Children can be poisoned if they play in soil that has lead in it or if someone tracks the soil inside the home.
- Does someone you live with work where lead is used? Some jobs that might create lead dust are: construction, bridge building, sandblasting, ship building, plumbing, battery making and recycling, car repair, furniture refinishing, and foundry casting. Workers can bring lead dust home on clothing, skin, or shoes.
- Do you have children under age six who have not had a blood test for lead? Young children should be tested for lead. This is especially true if you live in an older home, if your home has recently been remodeled, or if a brother, sister or a playmate has tested high for lead. Ask your doctor to test your children beginning at six months of age, and then every year until age six.
- Have neighbor children or playmates ever had a high blood lead test?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, your children may be at risk for lead poisoning. Look at the Action Steps on the next page to find out what you can do to protect your children's health!



## The Blood Test for Lead

- It only takes a small blood sample to tell if your child has lead poisoning.
- Ask your health care provider about testing.
- Lead levels are measured in micrograms per deciliter ( $\mu$ /dL).
  - *If your child's level is 10  $\mu$ /dL or more, it is too high.*
  - *You need to find out how she or he is getting the lead.*
- Your health care provider can help you find out what to do.

## ACTION STEPS

### **Have Your Children Tested for Lead**

- This test is often free at local health clinics.



### **Find Out if Your Home Has Lead**

- You may need to have your home or water tested. Your local or state health department can tell you how to do this for little or no cost. Many hardware stores also sell low-cost lead testing kits.
- Don't try to remove lead on your own. It should be done by trained and certified workers. You can find a certified lead paint removal company by contacting your local or state health department. Getting rid of lead in the wrong way can make the problem worse! Children and pregnant women need to stay away during a lead removal project.

### **Protect Your Children From Lead**

- Wash children's hands and face often with soap and water, especially before they eat. Wash toys every week.
- Keep down lead-based paint dust with housekeeping. Wipe windowsills, floors, and other surfaces with paper towels, warm

water and soap once a week. Rinse well.

- Never sweep, vacuum, or dry dust in a room that has lead dust. You will not remove the harmful dust and can stir it up. This includes porches, which were often painted with lead paint.
- Don't let children chew or put their mouths on windowsills. Keep cribs away from windowsills and walls.
- If any remodeling is being done, be sure you find out if work is happening on something that contains lead-based paint. Never dry scrape or dry sand lead paint. Don't burn or torch it. Children and pregnant women should stay away while work takes place. Test dust for lead around the remodeling area afterwards.



- If you have lead pipes or pipes joined with lead solder, you can take steps to cut down on the lead in your water:

# ACTION STEPS, continued

- Never use hot water from the tap for drinking, cooking, or making formula. Hot water can take more lead out of the pipes.
- When you haven't used any water for a few hours or overnight let the cold water run for a few minutes before using it again. You will know it has run long enough when the water changes temperature. Usually it gets colder. This clears out any water sitting in the pipes that may have collected lead or other metals. (See the chapter on drinking water on page 33.)
- Have your water tested for lead. Call your local or state health department to learn how.
- If someone in your home works with lead, they can bring it home on their clothes. Make sure they shower and change clothes and shoes before coming inside. Wash these clothes by themselves.
- If your yard or the yard at your children's daycare may have lead in the soil, don't let your children play there. Have the soil tested for lead to make sure it's safe. Put in grass or other plants to help keep children away from the soil in the meantime.
- Feed your children a healthy diet. Foods with vitamin C, calcium, and iron can help reduce lead poisoning. Children with lead poisoning often don't get enough iron or other minerals in their diets. Making sure your children get enough of these nutrients can lower how much lead their body takes in.

## When In Doubt, Check It Out!

- For blood tests, call your family doctor or public health clinic.
- For testing of paint samples and drinking water, call your local or state health department.
- To find a certified lead inspector or paint removal contractor, call the lead listing at 888/LEAD-LISTING (888/532-354-78464)—[www.leadlisting.org](http://www.leadlisting.org)
- For a packet of materials or questions about lead, call the National Lead Information Center, toll-free at 800/424-LEAD.
- For information on lead in drinking water, call the EPA Safe Drinking Water Hotline: 800/426-4791 or visit the website at [www.epa.gov/safewater](http://www.epa.gov/safewater).
- Contact HUD about tenants' rights and other housing issues at 800/HUDS-FHA—[www.hud.gov](http://www.hud.gov).
- For more information on Lead In and Around the Home, see *Home\*A\*Syst*. The *Home\*A\*Syst* handbook gives more details about this and other healthy home topics. 608/262-0024 or [www.uwex.edu/homeasyst](http://www.uwex.edu/homeasyst).

This chapter was adapted from "Lead In and Around the Home: Identifying and Managing Its Sources," by Karen Filchak, University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension. In *Home\*A\*Syst*, An Environmental Risk-Assessment Guide for the Home, ©1997 Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. All rights reserved.