
Lead exposure: childhood

Lead poisoning is entirely preventable. The key is stopping children from coming into contact with lead and treating children who have been poisoned by lead.

The goal is to prevent lead exposure to children before they are harmed. There are many ways parents can reduce a child's exposure to lead. The key is stopping children from coming into contact with lead. Lead hazards in a child's environment must be identified and controlled or removed safely.

How are children exposed to lead?

Lead-based paint and lead contaminated dust are the main sources of exposure for lead in U.S. children. Lead-based paints were banned for use in housing in 1978. All houses built before 1978 are likely to contain some lead-based paint. However, it is the deterioration of this paint that causes a problem. Approximately 24 million housing units have deteriorated leaded paint and elevated levels of lead-contaminated house dust. More than 4 million of these dwellings are homes to one or more young children.

Who is at risk?

Children under the age of 6 years old are at risk because they are growing so rapidly and because they tend to put their hands or other objects, which may be contaminated with lead dust, into their mouths.

Children living at or below the poverty line who live in older housing are at greatest risk. Additionally, children of some racial and ethnic groups and those living in older housing are disproportionately affected by lead.

What can be done to prevent exposure to lead?

It is important to determine the construction year of the house or the dwelling where your child may spend a large amount of time (e.g., grandparents or daycare). In housing built before 1978, assume that the paint has lead unless tests show otherwise.

- Talk to your state or local health department about testing paint and dust from your home for lead.
- Make sure your child does not have access to peeling paint or chewable surfaces painted with lead-based paint.
- Children and pregnant women should not be present in housing built before 1978 that is undergoing renovation. They should not participate in activities that disturb old paint or in cleaning up paint debris after work is completed.
- Create barriers between living/play areas and lead sources. Until environmental clean-up is completed, parents should clean and isolate all sources of lead. They should close and lock doors to keep children away from chipping or peeling paint on walls. You can also apply temporary barriers such as contact paper or duct tape, to cover holes in walls or to block children's access to other sources of lead.
- Regularly wash children's hands and toys. Hands and toys can become contaminated from household dust or exterior soil. Both are known lead sources.
- Regularly wet-mop floors and wet-wipe window components. Because household dust is a major source of lead, parents should wet-mop floors and wet-wipe horizontal surfaces every 2-3 weeks. Windowsills and wells can contain high levels of leaded dust. They should be kept clean. If feasible, windows should be shut to prevent abrasion of painted surfaces or opened from the top sash. Take off shoes when entering the house to prevent bringing lead-contaminated soil in from outside.
- Prevent children from playing in bare soil; if possible, provide them with sandboxes. Parents should plant grass on areas of bare soil or cover the soil with grass seed, mulch, or wood chips, if possible. Until the bare soil is covered, parents should move play areas away from bare soil and away from the sides of the house. If using a sandbox, parents should also cover the box when not in use to prevent cats from using it as a litter box. That will help protect children from exposure to animal waste.

To further reduce a child's exposure from non-residential paint sources:

- Avoid using traditional home remedies and cosmetics that may contain lead;
- Avoid eating candies imported from Mexico;

- Avoid using containers, cookware, or tableware to store or cook foods or liquids that are not shown to be lead free;
- Remove recalled toys and toy jewelry immediately from children.
- Use only cold water from the tap for drinking, cooking, and for making baby formula (Hot water is more likely to contain higher levels of lead. Most of the lead in household water usually comes from the plumbing in your house, not from the local water supply.);
- Shower and change clothes after finishing a task that involves working with lead-based products such as stain glass work, bullet making, or using a firing range.

This information was developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Prevention Tips. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/tips.htm>. Accessed January 13, 2014.

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