

## Frequently Asked Questions (Updated on March 14, 2005)

### What is lead poisoning?

- Lead is a natural mineral that has been used in many products.
- Lead is harmful to the human body.
- Small amounts of lead can build up in the body and cause lifelong learning and behavior problems. Buildup of lead in the body is referred to as *lead poisoning*.
- Lead Poisoning is the most common environmental illness in California children.
- **LEAD POISONING IS PREVENTABLE!**
- There is no known safe level of lead in the body.
- The United States has taken steps to remove many sources of lead but lead is still around us.
  - Lead in paint was severely restricted in 1978.
  - Lead solder in food cans was banned in the 1980s.
  - Lead in gasoline was removed during the early 1990s

### Who should worry about lead poisoning?

- Children under six years old and fetuses are at greatest risk of harmful health effects from lead poisoning.
  - Their brains and nervous systems are still forming.
  - They frequently put their hands or other objects in their mouths and crawl on floors or furniture contaminated with lead dust.
  - More of the lead that gets into their mouth is taken up into their bodies.
  - Lead can be measured in their blood and remains in their bodies for a long time.
  - Much of the lead is stored in their bones.
- Those children at high risk of getting lead into their bodies are:
  - Young children under six years of age who spend time in homes, childcare centers, or buildings built before 1978 that have chipping or peeling paint. (The old paint may still have lead in it.)

- Young children who play in bare soil. (They may get it in their mouths.)
  - Young children who eat non-food items. (This behavior is known as “pica.”) This is more common in children with a diet low in iron and calcium.
  - Children who have recently come from or spent time in other countries where more lead is found.
- Pregnant women exposed to lead should ask their doctor about a blood test. Lead crosses the placenta and has harmful effects on the fetus. An infant born to a mother with an elevated level of lead in her blood would be at risk for lead poisoning.
  - Adults who work in jobs or hobbies where they work with lead may bring the lead dust home on their clothes or equipment and expose household members. (For more on job or hobby lead poisoning, see the Occupational Lead Poisoning Prevention Program.) [Occupational Lead Poisoning Prevention Program \(OLPPP\)](#)

### **What are common sources of lead?**

- Lead-based paint (pre-1978). It may have been used both inside and outside of a home. Children may eat paint chips or chew on the surfaces of cribs, highchairs, windows, woodwork, walls, doors, or railings.
- Lead-contaminated soil. Lead may be in the soil where children play, especially near busy roadways or factories. The lead from gasoline used for many years has settled onto soil and is difficult to remove. This soil may also be tracked inside on shoes and clothing.
- Lead-contaminated dust from paint or soil. It clings to windowsills, floors, doorways and children’s toys, and is dangerous to young children who crawl and often put their hands and other objects in their mouths.
- Take-home exposure in the dust brought home on clothing, equipment, or in the car or truck driven from work. Lead dust can also come from hobbies that use lead.
  - Some common jobs and hobbies include: Battery manufacturing, radiator repair, construction, soldering, recycling, painting, demolition, scrap metal recycling, working with stained glass, pottery making, target shooting, and casting fishing weights.
- Imported food in cans that are sealed with lead solder. Some countries other than the United States still allow lead solder in food cans. Cans that have lead solder have very wide seams.
- Imported home remedies and imported cosmetics may contain lead. They often are imported from the Middle East, Southeast Asia, India, the Dominican Republic, or Mexico. The remedies are often bright yellow or orange in color.

Examples include: Alarcon, Alkohl, Azarcon, Bali goli, Bint al zahab, Coral, Greta,

Farouk, Ghasard, Kandou, Kohl, Liga, Litargirio, Lozeena, Pay-loo-ah, Sindoor, and Surma. There are many others.

- Imported or handmade pottery and tableware with leaded glaze. The lead from the glaze gets into food and beverages when these ceramics are used for cooking or storing food.
- Imported candies or foods, especially from Mexico, containing chili or tamarind. Lead can be found in candy, wrappers, pottery containers, and in certain ethnic foods, such as chapulines (dried grasshoppers).
- Metal jewelry. Lead has been found in inexpensive children's jewelry sold in vending machines across the country. It also has been found in inexpensive metal amulets worn for good luck or protection. Some costume jewelry designed for adults has also been found to contain lead. It is important to make sure that children don't handle or mouth any jewelry.

#### **SUMMARY OF RISKS AND SOURCES OF LEAD POISONING:**

Young children are at the greatest risk for lead poisoning because they play and crawl inside and outside buildings built before 1978 and in soil and dust that may contain lead. To make matters worse, children between 12 and 24 months of age often have their hands or toys in their mouths. To help prevent lead-tainted soil and dust from reaching your child, click here for [Simple Steps to Protect Your Child From Lead Poisoning.](#)

There are quick and easy ways to test an item for lead content. Please contact your local Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program for more information. If your county does not have a local Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program, contact your local health department or the Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Branch office. [County Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Programs.](#)

#### **How does lead harm a child?**

- Lead poisoning can harm a child's nervous system and brain when they are still forming.
- Small amounts of lead in the body can make it hard for children to learn, pay attention, and succeed in school.
- Lead can lead to a low blood count (anemia).
- Higher amounts of lead exposure can damage the nervous system, kidneys, and other major organs. Very high exposure can lead to seizures or death.

## How do I know if my child has lead poisoning?

- Most children who have lead poisoning do not look or act sick. Symptoms, if present, may be confused with common childhood complaints, such as stomachache, crankiness, headaches, or loss of appetite.
- *The only way to know if your child has lead poisoning is for the child to get a blood test for lead. Talk to your child's health care provider. Your child may need a blood test for lead poisoning.*
- Children age 12 months and 24 months who are enrolled in publicly funded health care such as Medi-Cal, Child Health and Disability Program (CHDP), and the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), or Healthy Families are at high risk and should be tested. Cost for the test is covered by government health programs and most health insurance plans.
- Children enrolled in publicly-funded health care who are between 24 months and 6 years old that have not been tested at the appropriate times, should be tested.
- Young children under six years of age who spend time in homes, childcare centers, or buildings built before 1978 that have chipping or peeling paint should be tested.
- Any infant or child who is thought to be at risk or comes in contact with items that may contain lead should be tested. ([See "What are the common sources of lead?"](#).)

## Can lead poisoning be treated?

- The best approach is to stop your children from coming into contact with lead.
- The most common way to treat lead poisoning in children is to find the lead source and remove it from their environment.
- Few children have high enough levels of lead in their blood that they require a medicine called a chelating agent. A chelating agent is a type of medicine that helps to remove the lead from the child's body.
- Your local Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program is available to help you and your health care provider to find and remove the source of lead poisoning. If your county does not have a local Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program, contact your local health department or the [Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Branch office](#).
- Any other problems associated with lead poisoning, such as anemia, should be treated.
- A healthy diet is recommended. ([See "How Can Healthy Food Protect My Child From Lead Poisoning?"](#).)

**SUMMARY OF HEALTH EFFECTS, TESTING AND TREATMENT:**

Lead poisoning can harm a child's brain and cause learning and behavior problems that may last a lifetime. Most children will not look or act sick, so a blood test for lead is the only way to find out if they have lead poisoning. Review the risk factors and any possible lead sources your child may be exposed to with your health care provider. If your child is lead poisoned, your local Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program, local health department, or the Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Branch will help you and your health care provider with treatment and/or finding and removing the source(s) of lead. [County Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program.](#)

**What are some simple steps to protect my child from lead poisoning?**

- Wash your child's hands and face frequently, especially before eating.
- Wash toys, floors, countertops and windowsills and wet mop floors weekly with an all-purpose detergent.
- Don't use imported foods that come in cans with wide seams.
- Avoid giving children imported candy or snacks containing chili or tamarind.
- Feed your child regular meals with a diet high in calcium, iron, and vitamin C and low in fat. ([See section on healthy diet.](#))
- Clean up paint chips and peeling paint safely. Your local Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program can give you information on safe cleaning. Keep furniture away from damaged paint. Pay special attention to cribs, beds, highchairs, and playpens.
- Allow cold water to run for a few minutes in the morning before using it for drinking, cooking, or mixing formula in case there may be lead in your household pipes. Do not use hot water from the tap for drinking or in food preparation.
- Avoid using handmade, older, or imported dishes for food or drink preparation, storage, or serving, unless you are sure they do not contain lead.
- Avoid using imported home remedies or cosmetics that contain lead. If you are not sure, check with your local county lead program. ([See County Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Programs.](#))
- Take off your shoes before entering the house. (Wipe shoes off - this will help prevent lead dust and soil from getting into your house.)
- Change out of work clothes before entering the house. If you work with lead at your job or hobby, take a shower at your workplace, if possible. Otherwise, shower and remove clothing immediately upon returning home. Handle clothing carefully and wash separately.

- When moving into a home, ask the owner about any problems with lead and know the age of the building.
- Before remodeling, ask a trained professional to test the paint in your house. If lead is in the paint, learn how to handle it safely. Click here for some [brochures](#).
- Don't let your child play in areas where soil is exposed.
- Vacuum carpets frequently to reduce household dust.

### **How can healthy foods protect my child from lead poisoning?**

A good diet can help prevent lead from getting into your child's body. These suggestions provide your child with a healthy diet and also prevent lead from being absorbed into your child's body. Your child should:

- Eat regular meals (four to six times a day).
- Eat calcium-rich foods (cheese, milk, spinach, salmon, yogurt, tofu, and leafy greens).
- Eat iron-rich foods (lean red meat, chicken or turkey without skin, raisins, beans, oatmeal, and split peas).
- Eat vitamin C to help the body absorb iron (fruit juice, oranges, grapefruit, tomatoes, broccoli, kiwi, and strawberries).
- Reduce fatty foods such as fried foods, fast foods, and "junk" foods (donuts, potato chips, and cupcakes). However, some fat in the diet is very important for brain development under age two. Milk and butter are healthier sources of fat.