Frequently Asked Questions

What is lead and where does it come from?

Lead is a metal that can be harmful when it gets into the body. There are many sources of lead. Lead can be found in dust, air, water, soil, and in some products used in and around our homes. The most common source is dust in homes where lead-based paint was used prior to being banned in 1978. Other sources of exposure exist such as plumbing and fixtures that may contain lead, imported spices, homeopathic medicines, imported toys and jewelry, imported pottery and cookware.

What is lead poisoning?

Lead poisoning occurs when a person's health or body functions are negatively affected by lead contamination in what they eat, drink, touch, or breathe. There are many factors that affect how different people's bodies handle exposure to lead. These factors include a person's age, nutritional status, and genetic makeup, as well as the source of lead and length of their exposure.

Who is at greatest risk?

Children under age six are most susceptible since their brain is still developing. During this time, low levels of lead can interfere with normal brain development, resulting in permanently reduced IQ and behavioral problems. This is also the age during which hand-to-mouth activity is a child's way of exploring, and children spend more time crawling on the floor where they can pick up dust containing lead on their hands.

What about adults and older children? Can they be lead poisoned?

Yes, but the amount of lead that would have to be ingested or inhaled by an adult or older child is much greater than that needed to cause damage to a child.

Is there any safe level of lead for a child?

No safe blood lead level in children has been identified. Children are especially at risk from lead because of their small size and developing brains. Lead exposure can affect nearly every system in the body. Even low levels of lead in blood have been shown to affect a child's IQ, ability to pay attention, and academic achievement.

How do children get lead poisoning?

Most children get lead poisoning from paint in homes built before 1978. When old paint cracks and peels, it makes dangerous dust. The dust is so small you cannot see it. Most children get lead poisoning when they breathe or swallow the dust on their hands and toys.

How does lead get into drinking water?

Lead can enter drinking water when water pipes or water service connections that contain lead wear down (corrode). If water pipes, plumbing or connections to water systems that contain lead corrode, a number of factors play a role in whether lead will enter the water, and if it does, how much lead enters.

How do I know if my child has been exposed to lead? Is there a test?

A blood lead test is the most common way to find out if your child has been exposed to lead and has a detectable blood lead level. Most children with detectable levels of lead in their blood have no obvious symptoms.

If you think your child may have been exposed to lead, talk to your child's health care provider about getting a blood lead test. Your health care provider can test for blood lead. Many private insurance policies cover the cost of testing for blood lead. Children covered by Medicaid are eligible for free testing.

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How do I know if my child is at risk?

Any child can be exposed to lead. However, some groups of children are at higher risk, including children who: live in homes built before 1978 with paint that is chipping, peeling, or in poor condition, lower income families, minority groups, recent immigrants from countries with lead in the environment, or have parents or household members who are exposed to lead at work or through a hobby.

What can I do if my child has an elevated blood lead level?

Your child's doctor or health care provider is the best resource for addressing issues about your child's health. Early intervention is key to reducing long-term effects.

Can lead affect my baby during pregnancy?

Lead can cross from the mother to the baby starting at about the 12th week of pregnancy. The amount of lead in the mother's blood and in the baby's blood is about the same. Lead that is stored in a mother's bones from past long-term exposure can be released into the blood during pregnancy. This means that the level of lead in a pregnant woman's blood can start to increase during pregnancy.

Are there foods that get ahead of lead?

Foods high in iron, calcium and Vitamin C can help prevent lead poisoning:

- Iron – Protects from the harmful effects of lead
- Calcium – Makes it hard for lead to enter the body
- Vitamin C – Helps the body absorb iron and calcium better

How do I protect my family from lead exposure?

It is important to find out the year your home was built. If your child spends a lot of time somewhere else, like a grandparent's home or daycare, you should also find out the year when that place was built. In homes or buildings built before 1978, assume that the paint contains lead unless tests show otherwise. If the home is under renovation or in need of repair, cracking or peeling paint could create dangerous dust.

You can protect your family from lead exposure by:

- Making sure children eat nutritious meals high in iron and calcium
- Getting your home checked for lead hazards including lead-based paint if your home is built before 1978.
- Regularly wash children's hands and toys to remove contamination from lead in household dust or soil
- Take off shoes when entering the house to prevent bringing in lead contaminated soil from outside
- Avoid using imported containers, cookware, pottery, teapots, or tableware to store or cook foods or liquids
- Check the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) for recalled toys
- Shower and change clothes after finishing a task that involves working with lead-based products such as stained glass, making bullets, or using a firing range, and wash clothing separately

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