



Finding Lead in the Home

What is Lead Poisoning?

Lead is part of our world today. It is found in the air, soil, dust and the paint of some homes or buildings built before 1978. Being exposed to too much lead can cause serious health problems. Lead is never a normal part of your body. The good news is that lead poisoning can be prevented. This fact sheet provides answers to some of the most commonly asked questions about lead poisoning.

How can I be exposed to lead?

Lead enters your body each time you inhale leaded dust or fumes, or swallow something that contains lead.

Exposure to lead may occur in several ways:

- Eating foods or drinking water that contain lead.
- Spending time in areas with deteriorating lead-based paint.
- Working in jobs where lead is used.
- Using traditional medicines that contain lead.
- Participating in hobbies that may use lead, like making stained glass or fishing with lead sinkers.

How can lead affect adults?

The effects of lead are the same whether it enters the body through breathing or swallowing. The main target in the body for lead toxicity is the nervous system. Long-term, and high-level exposure of adults to lead can cause brain and kidney damage. High-level lead exposure in men and women can affect their reproductive health. A pregnant woman's exposure to lead can increase her risk for delivering her baby early, and for having a small baby.

How can lead affect children?

Children are more vulnerable to lead poisoning than adults because their nervous systems are still developing. Children's bodies absorb more of the lead they take in than adult bodies. Babies and small children can swallow or breathe in lead from contaminated dirt, dust, or sand while they play on the ground or floor. These activities make it easier for children to be exposed because the dirt or dust on their hands, toys, or other items may contain lead. Children are also more sensitive to the effects of lead than adults. Even at low levels of exposure, lead can affect a child's learning, behavior and growth.

How can I tell if my child/family member has too much lead in their body?

People with high levels of lead in their bodies often do not seem sick. The symptoms that might occur are very general and can happen for many reasons. Therefore, the only way to find out if there is too much lead in the blood is a simple blood test. Your local public health clinic or family doctor can do this test for you. It involves taking a sample of blood from your family member's finger or a vein in their arm. If the blood sample shows a problem with lead, more testing may be done.

Is there a way to reduce a high blood lead level?

The best way to lower a high blood lead level is to prevent continued exposure to lead. There is a medication that helps to remove lead from the body when the blood lead level is very high. The medication combines with lead so the body can get rid of the lead more easily. A doctor will decide if this treatment is needed.

Who Should Be Tested

The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) developed the Blood Lead Screening Guidelines for Minnesota to help physicians understand who should be tested for lead, and at what intervals. These recommendations include:

A physician should offer a blood lead test to a child at any age if:

- The parent expresses a concern about, or asks for a blood lead test for their child;
- The child moved from a major metropolitan area or another country within the last twelve months.

Child health-care providers should offer a blood lead test to children at one and two years of age, and children up to age six who have not previously been tested if:

- The child lives in Minneapolis or St. Paul; **OR**
- The child receives services from assistance programs such as WIC, Medicaid, Minnesota Care, or Prepaid Medical Assistance Programs; **OR**
- The child meets any of the following criteria, including: regularly visiting a home, childcare, or other building built before 1950 in the last six months; regularly visiting a home, childcare, or other building built before 1978 that has undergone renovation, major repairs, or damage in the last six months; or has a sibling, playmate, or housemate with an elevated blood lead level.

A health care provider should conduct an annual evaluation of children aged three to six years with previous “normal” blood lead levels to determine if any changes have occurred to their environment. If the answer to any of the following is “Yes” or “Don’t Know”, the child should receive a blood lead test:

- Does the child have a playmate, sibling or housemate with a recent elevated blood lead level?
- Has the child moved to or started regularly visiting a home, childcare, or other building built before 1950?
- Has there been any repair, remodeling, or damage (such as water damage or chipped paint) to a home, childcare, or other building built before 1978 that the child regularly visits?

For more information about the Blood Lead Screening Guidelines for Minnesota and other information about lead please contact the MDH Lead Program at www.health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/lead or by telephone at 651-201-4610.

To request this material in another format contact:

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Questions?

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of Health Lead Program at
651-201-4610 or visit our website at
www.health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/lead