



Department of Health

## Bureau of Environmental Health and Radiation Protection

"Protect and improve the health of all Ohioans by preventing disease, promoting good health and assuring access to quality care."

# Lead

## Answers to Frequently Asked Health Questions

### What is lead?

Lead is a naturally occurring bluish-gray metal found in the earth's crust. Prior to our current knowledge of the health hazards of lead, it was widely used in products such as gasoline, paints, batteries, metal products and ammunition -- just to name a few. Because lead is toxic, its use in the U.S. has been dramatically reduced since the 1980's.

### Lead in the environment

Although lead occurs naturally in the environment, most of the high levels of lead found come from human activities and products.

Lead does not break down in the environment. Once lead falls on to soil, it usually sticks to the soil particles. If the soil is uncovered and open to the air or becomes disturbed, lead-contaminated dust is created. This dust can be easily breathed in or



swallowed. During construction activities, the possibility of lead-contaminated dust is an important concern.

Gardens grown in lead-contaminated soils may contain lead. Fruits, grains and vegetables (especially root vegetables such as beets, carrots, parsnips, radishes, turnips, and rutabagas) absorb some of the lead through their roots. There is also the possibility of lead-contaminated dust falling onto crops.

Inside some older homes, lead can be found in lead-based paint, lead-contaminated dusts from the paints and even in older lead pipes that carry water. A child can easily eat lead paint chips, breathe or ingest the dust on their fingers.

### How does lead get in your body?

You may be exposed to lead by breathing (inhalation), eating/drinking (ingestion) or by skin contact (dermal contact). However, only very small amounts of lead can get into your body through dermal contact. Inhalation and ingestion of lead-contaminated dust and soil are the main health concerns.

### How does lead affect your health?

The harmful effects of lead are the same whether it is breathed or swallowed. The main target for lead toxicity is the nervous system, including the brain. But lead can negatively affect every organ of the body.

Children are most vulnerable to lead poisoning because they play outside, close to the ground or in the dirt. Small children also put their fingers in their mouths. Compared to adults, a bigger proportion of the amount of lead swallowed will enter the blood in children. About 99% of the amount of lead taken into the body of an adult will leave in the waste within a couple of weeks. But only about 32% of the lead taken into the body of a child will leave in the waste.

Lead exposure in the womb, in infancy, or in early childhood may also slow mental development and lower intelligence later in childhood. Lead can cause irritability and

aggressive behavior in children. If pregnant women have high levels of lead in their bodies, fetuses exposed to lead in the womb may be born prematurely and have lower weights at birth. In some cases, pregnant women with high levels of exposure to lead may have miscarriages.

Some other harmful health effects of lead include damaged kidneys, damaged male reproductive system, severe "stomachaches," a poor appetite, sleep disorders, and hearing problems. Lead can also decrease reaction time and affect the memory.

### **Is there a medical test to determine whether I have been exposed to lead?**

Yes, there is a test to see if you have been exposed to lead. The primary screening method is the measurement of total lead in the blood. This test can tell if you have been recently exposed to lead.

Also, exposure to lead can be evaluated by measuring the erythrocyte protoporphyrin (EP) in the blood sample. EP is a part of red blood cells known to increase when the amount of lead in the blood is high. However, the EP level is not sensitive enough to identify children with elevated blood lead levels below about 25 micrograms per deciliter ( $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$ ). For this reason, total lead is the primary method of screening.

Lead can also be measured in teeth or bones by X-ray techniques. These tests can tell about long-term exposure but are not widely available.

### **How can families reduce the risk of exposure to lead?**

The most important way a family can lower exposures to lead is to avoid exposure to lead-contaminated soil and dust sources, avoid lead-based paint chips, avoid water from lead-lined pipes and avoid some plastic products made outside the United States.

The swallowing of lead-contaminated soil or dust is a very important exposure pathway

for children. This problem can be reduced in many ways. Regular hand and face washing to remove lead dust and soil, especially before meals, can lower the possibility that lead on the skin is accidentally swallowed while eating. Families can lower exposures to lead by regularly cleaning the home of dust and tracked-in soil. Door mats can help lower the amount of soil that is tracked into the home and removing your shoes before you enter the house will also help. Planting grass and shrubs over bare soil areas in the yard can lower contact that children and pets may have with soil and the tracking of soil into the home. Also, wash all produce grown in lead-contaminated soils before eating.

Families whose members are exposed to lead-contaminated soil and dust can minimize the exposure to children by changing and bagging their work clothes before they are brought into the home for cleaning. Also, they should immediately wash their hands or shower.

It is important that children have proper nutrition and eat a balanced diet of foods that supply adequate amounts of vitamins and minerals, especially a diet high in calcium and iron. Good nutrition lowers the amount of swallowed lead that passes to the bloodstream and also may lower some of the toxic effects of lead.



### **What are the federal health recommendations?**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) considers children to have an elevated blood-lead level if the lead in the blood is at or above  $5 \mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$ . CDC are recommending environmental assessments

PRIOR to blood lead screening of children at risk for lead exposure and to monitor the status of children with a confirmed blood-lead level of  $\geq 5$   $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$  until all recommended environmental investigations and mitigation strategies are complete. Medical treatment may be necessary in children if the lead concentration in blood is higher than 45  $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$ .

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) requires that the concentration of lead in air that the public breathes be no higher than 1.5 micrograms per cubic meter ( $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ ) averaged over 3 months. EPA regulations no longer allow lead in gasoline. The Clean Air Act Amendments (CAAA) of 1990 banned the sale of leaded gasoline as of December 31, 1995.

The EPA regulations also limit lead in drinking water to 0.015 milligrams per liter (mg/L). The 1988 Lead Contamination Control Act requires the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), EPA, and the states to recall or repair water coolers containing lead. This law also requires new coolers to be lead-free. In addition, drinking water in schools must be tested for lead, and the sources of lead in this water must be removed.

To help protect small children, CPSC requires that the concentration of lead in most paints available through normal consumer channels be not more than 0.06%. The Federal Hazardous Substance Act (FHSA) bans children's products containing hazardous amounts of lead.

The EPA has also developed standards for lead paint hazards, lead in dust, and lead in soil. To educate parents, homeowners, and tenants about lead hazards, lead poisoning prevention in the home, and the lead abatement process, EPA has published several general information pamphlets. Copies of these pamphlets can be obtained from the National Lead Information Center or from various Internet sites, including <http://www.epa.gov/opptintr/lead>.

## References:

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 2007. Toxicological profile for lead. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service.

## Where Can I Get More Information?

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