
Lead Poisoning

Lead poisoning is the No. 1 environmental health threat among children. Even low blood lead levels can be harmful to children and have been associated with decreased intelligence as a long-term complication. Most children with elevated-lead levels do not demonstrate easily observed symptoms. The only way to tell they have lead poisoning is to test their blood.

Young children, especially those 12 to 24 months old, are at greatest risk for lead poisoning because they often put their hands in their mouths and thus are more likely to eat dust, paint chips and soil contaminated with lead. Children also absorb lead more easily because of their growth, development and increased metabolism (the process the body uses to change nutrients to energy). Therefore, children are more sensitive to the harmful health effects of lead.

Children can be exposed to lead by:

- The ingestion and/or inhalation of household dust containing lead from deteriorating or chipping lead-based paint is the most common pathway of lead exposure for children.
- Seventy-four percent of all homes built before 1978 in the United States have some lead-based paint on the exterior and/or interior of the home.
- Drinking water that has moved through lead pipes.
- Being exposed to lead dust carried by family workers who work with lead.
- Eating food served on lead-glazed pottery, improperly fired ceramic ware or leaded crystal.
- Eating food taken from lead-soldered cans.
- Taking some traditional/folk medicines that contain lead such as greta or azarcon.
- Being exposed to lead through contamination of the environment by adult hobbies such as making stained glass or pottery.

As a child care provider, you can help reduce children's risk of lead poisoning by:

- Washing children's hands frequently and always before meals.
- Feeding children diets rich in iron and calcium, which will reduce the amount of lead absorbed from the gastrointestinal tract.
- Preparing and storing food in containers that do not release lead such as those made of lead-free glass, stainless steel or plastic. Never store food in opened cans. Only use ceramic containers that have labels saying they are made with lead-free glazes. Only use toys and arts and crafts materials that do not contain lead. Arts and crafts materials made after 1990 that are labeled "conforms to ASTM D-4236" and have no health warnings, are considered nontoxic.
- Relocating during remodeling projects that may create lead-based-paint dust.
- Having your facility evaluated for lead hazards if you believe it may be at risk.

Older buildings with deteriorating paint carry a greater risk for lead hazards. Also be cautious of buildings that have been a source of lead exposure for children who have been diagnosed with lead poisoning. Lead paint concentrations were highest before 1950, but lead continued to be used in residential paint until 1978. To get further information about childhood screening test, home and residential environmental investigation and preventing lead poisoning, call your state or local health department, the National Lead Information Hotline, **800-LEAD-FYI** or the National Lead Information Clearinghouse, **800-424-LEAD**.