

LEAD FACTS & INFORMATION

What is lead?

Lead is a common, natural, yet highly toxic metal. It is found throughout the environment in lead-based paint, air, soil, household dust, food, certain types of pottery, porcelain and pewter, and water. Because it is stable and easy to work with, historically it has been used for a variety of purposes. Lead can pose a significant health risk if too much of it enters the body. The greatest risk is to young children and pregnant women.

How does lead enter people's bodies?

The main ways that children and adults get lead into their bodies are by eating it (ingestion) or breathing it (inhalation). Lead enters children's bodies primarily through hand-to-mouth activity, such as chewing on easily accessible surfaces which contain lead paint, playing in dust and soil which contains lead and putting the fingers into the mouth, or by directly inhaling dust from deteriorated or damaged lead-based paint.

Why are children at greater risk from exposure than adults?

There are several reasons why children are at greater risk:

- Children are more vulnerable to damage because their bodies and nervous system are still developing.
- Frequent hand-to-mouth activity brings a child into greater contact with lead in the environment, especially lead in dust and soil.
- Children absorb and retain a larger percentage of ingested lead per unit of body weight than adults, which increases the toxic effects of the lead.

What are the health effects of lead?

Lead can build up in the body and can cause damage to the brain and central nervous system, red blood cells and kidneys. Lead can slow down the normal mental and physical development of growing bodies and has been attributed to cause decreased intelligence, decreased hearing acuity and decreased stature.

Should children be tested for elevated levels of lead?

Massachusetts Lead Poisoning Prevention and Control regulations require at minimum that children be screened for lead poisoning once between the ages of nine and twelve months and annually thereafter until the age of 48 months. Children are required to present evidence of having been previously screened for lead poisoning as a condition for entry into kindergarten. However, if a child is considered to be at high risk for lead poisoning due to the potential for exposure (ie, living in a home built prior to 1978 which has peeling, chipping or flaking paint and/or plaster or is undergoing renovation, having parents who work in a lead-related occupation or have a lead-related hobby, having siblings who are lead poisoned, or living near lead smelting operations or similar point sources of lead), more frequent lead screening is required.



Where can I have my child tested or screened?

Concerned parents should consult with their own child's pediatrician regarding blood lead level testing. Testing of actual lead levels from a blood sample (removed from the vein) is more accurate than lead screening. However, blood screening is performed monthly at the Quincy Health Department (on the 3rd Tuesday of the month, by appointment only, for children ages nine months to six years). Contact the Quincy Health Department at 376-1284 for more details.

If I am concerned about lead dust, are there any special cleaning procedures I should be aware of?

The cleaning of surfaces suspected to contain lead dust (ie, window wells, floors, etc.) may temporarily reduce the risk of lead poisoning. Use of high phosphate detergents such as Tri-Sodium Phosphate (TSP) or automatic dishwasher detergents, is recommended. Use plastic gloves, follow directions on the cleanser box, use disposable towels or cloths on each surface to be cleaned, and make sure to rinse surfaces using clean towels and water. The towels or cloths should be disposed after use, (do not put dirty towels into the wash water), and the wash water should be poured down the toilet (avoid pouring it down the sink).

IMPORTANT!! Do not vacuum lead hazard surfaces. If present, lead dust could be spread into the air by vacuuming.

Where can I get additional information on lead?

For more information regarding lead poisoning, lead paint, lead in water, lead testing and other lead-related topics, contact the local Health Department in Quincy at 376-1273. Additional information is also available from the State's Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program at (617) 753-8400 or 1-800-523-9571.

