



Lead Poisoning Information For Members

What is Lead Poisoning?

Lead is a metal. It can be poisonous to humans. Lead poisoning occurs when you take in too much lead by breathing or swallowing something with lead in it. This might include food, dust, paint or water. Too much lead in the body can cause irreversible problems in growth and development in children, including:

- Behavior problems
- Hearing problems.
- Learning problems
- Slowed growth

Lead poisoning can cause serious health problems. This includes high blood pressure. It also includes damage to the brain, nervous system, stomach and kidneys. Too much lead can damage almost every organ system. The most harm is done to the brain, nervous system, kidneys and blood.

What Causes Lead Poisoning?

Lead poisoning is usually caused by being exposed to small amounts of lead over a long time. It could be at home, work or day care. It can also happen very quickly if you are exposed to big amounts of lead. The most common sources of lead exposure for children are:

- Lead-based paint
- Dust and soil that are contaminated by lead

Older homes and buildings are trouble areas for lead. About one out of four U.S. homes have issues with lead paint. Toys and jewelry made in other countries may have high lead levels. For a list of recalled products, see the Consumer Product Safety Commission website at: www.cpsc.gov

Adults can contact lead in the workplace or while doing hobbies. Those who work with lead are at a higher risk. They may include metal smelters, welders or pottery makers.

Other sources of lead exposure include:

- Contaminated air (including industrial emissions), water and soil
- Materials used in certain hobbies, such as stained glass, building lead-based models, reloading ammunition or shooting at indoor ranges
- Some alternative medicines and supplements, such as certain vitamins from India
- Eating food or juice stored in cans or pots made with lead or glazed with lead-based glazes, which are not manufactured in the United States

Most people contact some lead in their lifetime. Rules have reduced lead exposure in the United States. But it is still a big

problem. This is especially true for young children. It is estimated that lead poisoning affects about 310,000 children in the U.S.

What are the Symptoms?

It may be hard to see the warning signs of lead poisoning at first. This is because the effects are hard to detect. Or they may look like other conditions. When it gets worse, general symptoms may include:

- Digestive problems
- Fatigue
- Headaches

Children with lead poisoning may ...

- Show slightly lower intelligence than other kids
- May be smaller than other children their age
- Have issues like irritability or aggressiveness, hyperactivity, learning difficulties, lethargy and loss of appetite

In adults, behavioral symptoms can include:

- Irritability
- Mood and personality changes
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Difficulty concentrating
- Memory loss

At high levels, lead can affect the central nervous system and lead to...

- Poor coordination
- Weakness in hands and feet
- Headaches, and in severe cases, convulsions, paralysis and coma

How is it Diagnosed?

A lead blood test finds out how much lead is in the blood. But this test does not measure lead in the whole body. A urine sample collected over 24 hours and tested for lead can do this. Diagnosing lead poisoning is difficult. This is because the symptoms can be caused by many issues. Most children with lead poisoning do not have symptoms until their blood lead levels are very high.

How is it Treated?

Treatment for lead poisoning includes removing the source of lead exposure and eating a balanced diet. Adequate nutrition with plenty of iron helps prevent absorption of lead. Often this treatment approach is enough to reduce lead levels in the body. Other treatments may be needed if this is not successful or if lead levels are very high.

It is important to make sure that children stay away from lead. The best way to do this is to keep children out of buildings that have lead-based paint.

Who is at Highest Risk of Lead Poisoning?

Lead poisoning can occur at any age. But kids are at most risk. Children who are at highest risk for lead poisoning include those who:

- Live in homes or buildings built before 1978, especially if built before 1950 when lead-based paint was commonly used
- Are immigrants, refugees or adoptees from other countries
- Are 6 years old or less; babies and young children are the most vulnerable to lead poisoning because they:
 - Often put their hands and objects in their mouths
 - Sometimes swallow nonfood items
 - Have higher gastrointestinal absorption of lead
 - Have brains that are rapidly developing

Your doctor should screen your child twice before the age of 2.

Also, lead exposure or lead poisoning may occur in:

- People whose drinking water flows through lead-soldered pipes
- Adults who work with lead either in their occupation or as a hobby, such as metal smelters, pottery makers or stained glass artists
- People who eat food from cans made with lead solder, which are manufactured outside the United States
- People who use ceramic containers for cooking or storing food or beverages because some ceramic glaze contains lead that may have been improperly fired or cured
- People who eat or breathe traditional or folk remedies that contain lead, such as some herbs and vitamins from India
- People who live in communities contaminated by industrial emissions

References

Healthwise, Incorporated. Lead Poisoning. Author: Debby Golonka, MPH. Medical Review: Michael J. Sexton, MD (Pediatrics), R. Steven Tharratt, MD, MPVM, FACP, FCCP (Pulmonary, Critic Care, Medical Toxicology). June 26, 2008.

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