

Harris County

HCPHES

Public Health & Environmental Services

Herminia Palacio, M.D., M.P.H.
Executive Director
2223 West Loop South
Houston, Texas 77027
Tele: (713) 439-6000
Fax: (713) 439-6080

B. Z. (Bud) Karachiwala, M.S., M.B.A.
Director
Environmental Public Health
2223 West Loop South
Houston, TX 77027
Tele: (713) 439-6270
Fax: (713) 439-6316

LEAD FACT SHEET

What is lead?

Lead is a soft, blue-gray metal. It occurs naturally in the earth's crust but has been spread throughout the environment by various human activities. In the past, dangerous amounts of lead were added to paint and gasoline products. Today in the United States, those amounts are no longer added to these products, but lead from our past activities remains. Lead is still present in other items such as batteries, solder, ammunition and roofing materials.

How are people exposed to lead?

People are exposed to lead by contaminated air, water, food and dust or dirt. People can be exposed if they live near an unhealthy dump site, live or work in buildings that contain peeling lead-based paint, or use lead in their jobs or hobbies. If your home was built before 1978 there is a high chance that it contains lead. Lead also exists in some food cans that have been improperly sealed and in pottery that has been improperly glazed. Most children are exposed to lead because they live in old homes that have lead contaminated dust. Children get this dust on their hands and toys and then they transfer it to their mouth. They are also exposed by eating or chewing on contaminated items or by playing in lead contaminated dirt.

How can lead affect my health?

There are different levels of lead contamination, but high levels can damage the kidneys, heart and reproductive system. At very high levels, lead poisoning occurs and can cause mental retardation, coma, convulsions and death. Of all people, young children are at greatest risk because lead can damage their developing brain and nervous system, slow their growth and cause learning, behavioral and hearing problems. Many babies are exposed to lead even before they are born through lead that a mother is exposed to during her pregnancy.

What symptoms should I expect to have if I've been exposed?

Most people do not have any symptoms at low levels of exposure. However, at high levels you would likely have:

- headaches
- anemia
- tiredness
- vomiting
- crankiness
- poor appetite and weight loss
- nervousness
- constipation and stomach pain

What should I do if I think my family is being/has been exposed to lead?

First you should go to the doctor for a blood lead test. The doctor will ask you questions about where you live, what you or your child eats and where the adults in your house work. It is important to find out how you are getting exposed to lead. . The level of lead is reported as the number of micrograms of lead per deciliter of whole blood (abbreviated as $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) state that levels greater than or equal to 10 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$ are considered to be an elevated blood lead level (EBL), and actions should be taken to lower the level below 10. Recent research suggests the potential for adverse health effects on IQ begin at levels below 5, and the goal for any child should be as low a blood lead level as possible.

Every child between 9 months and 36 months of age should be tested for lead poisoning at least once a year. HCPHES recommends that all children should receive the test at 12 and 24 months of age. After the age of 36 months, depending on the lead levels of prior tests and risk assessment performed by the pediatrician, lead screening may be discontinued. However, for children who live in houses built before 1978, have a history of elevated lead levels and/or are exposed to lead hazards, annual testing should continue up to the age of six. Also adults and children living in a house where paint is being removed may need a lead test. Anyone who works with lead or around lead should be tested for lead poisoning. Use the links below to find out more about childhood and adult lead testing.

<http://www.dshs.state.tx.us/lead/resources.shtm>

<http://www.dshs.state.tx.us/lead/providers.shtm>

What if I have lead around the house?

If your home was built before 1978, there is a good chance the paint has lead in it. Call your local health department if you have questions about removing lead-based paint at 713-439-6369.

Outside the home:

- Do not try to remove the lead paint yourself.
- Keep your family, especially young children, away from areas where the lead paint is peeling or chipping.
- Plant grass or bushes in the bare dirt areas around your home.

Inside the home:

- Keep your home very clean. Pay special attention to areas your child can reach.
- Clean floors, window sills, doorframes and baseboards with dishwasher soap and water at least once a week.
- Do not reuse cleaning rags until washed.
- Wash the cleaning rags separately from other family laundry.
- Avoid putting non-food items in your mouth.
- Wash your child's toys, bottles and pacifiers often.
- Wash your child's hands before meals and at bedtime.

How can I keep my food safe from lead?

Food can become contaminated with lead when it is cooked or placed in pots and pans that are contaminated. It then becomes an easy way for lead to enter your body.

To keep lead out of your food:

- Do not use glazed pottery to cook, serve or store food unless you know it is lead-free.
- Some pottery (including Mexican bean pots), ceramics and crystal also contain lead.
- Store food in plastic, stainless steel or non-lead glass containers.
- Do not store liquids in lead crystal.
- Wash hands and countertops before preparing food.
- Wash fruits and vegetables before eating.
- Use water from the cold tap for drinking, cooking or preparing infant formula.

To keep your child safe from other sources of lead:

- Do not give your child home remedies like:
 - Azarcon – a bright reddish-orange powder, which contains 90% lead.
 - Greta – a yellow powder, which is almost 100% lead.
- If you have given your child Azarcon or Greta, you should take them to the doctor to be tested for lead poisoning right away.
- Replace old vinyl mini-blinds.
- Keep all cosmetics and other non-food items out of your child's mouth.
- Only give your child medicines prescribed for them by a licensed doctor.