

## Keeping your kids safe from the dangers of lead

By Teddi Nicolaus

**P**ricized for its ability to resist moisture and corrosion as well as brighten colors, lead has made its way into many products that we use around our homes. They include things like roofing, car batteries, pottery, jewelry, pipes and paint. But the benefits of this naturally occurring metal come with a frightening downside: Lead is highly toxic to humans. And it's especially dangerous for kids under age 6 because they are still developing.

During their early years, children grow really fast. Lead can damage their brains and nervous system. That can cause learning and behavioral problems and a host of other issues as well. The younger the child, the more harm lead can cause.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 500,000 U.S. children have elevated levels of lead in their blood. The rates are highest in children who live in cities and in housing built before 1978.

Globally, the numbers are even higher. Officials estimate that 1 out of every 3 children — or 800 million kids — around the world are affected by lead poisoning.

Lead exposure can also be dangerous during pregnancy, breastfeeding and infancy.

Young children absorb four to five times more lead into their bodies than adults do.

“There is no safe level of lead exposure for children, or for anyone,” says

lead poisoning prevention expert DeeAnn Guo, who works with the Childhood Lead Action Project. “Lead is a toxin, and we want to avoid lead exposure at any level.”

The U.S. government banned lead-based paint in 1978, and leaded gasoline was phased out by 1996. But lead continues to linger all around us. It can be found in old products like toys, and in new things such as battery manufacturing and roofing materials.

But the biggest source by far of lead poisoning for children is old paint. Lead tastes sweet, Guo says, and small kids might chew on chips from walls and woodwork and around windows and doors. Kids can also inhale the dust created by aging lead-based paint, or ingest the dust by touching surfaces and putting their hands in their mouths.

“Anywhere there’s lead paint, lead dust can be a problem,” Guo says. “Sometimes it’s visible and sometimes it’s invisible.”

It’s important for parents to be aware of the age of their homes, she says. An old house

can have peeling and chipping paint. Kids also love to play outside, but even this can pose a risk. Soil can pick up lead from old exterior paint on homes and buildings, as well as leaded gasoline once used in cars. Children who live near highways or in older cities are at greater risk for exposure through soil.

Lead can also enter your home through lead water pipes and brass or bronze faucets and fixtures. Millions of lines of pipes that bring water to homes, schools and other buildings in communities are estimated to contain lead.

The bottom line is that kids can be exposed to lead wherever they live, learn and play, so it’s important to talk to your child’s health care provider about whether your child might be at risk. A blood test is the best way to find out if your child has been exposed to lead. Your child’s doctor can recommend follow-up care based on the level of lead that is detected in your child’s blood.



>> For more lead safety tips, visit [www.epa.gov/lead](http://www.epa.gov/lead)

### Take preventive action

The good news is that lead poisoning is preventable. There are many actions you can take to protect kids from the dangers of lead.

**Make time to clean:** Peeling and cracking paint creates lead dust that must be cleaned with a wet or damp cloth, sponge or mop. Ideally, use wet paper towels to clean up lead dust around windows and play areas. Wash your kids’ hands and toys often with soap and water, especially before they eat and sleep.

**Test your home:** If your home was built before 1978, talk with your local health department about how to get your home tested for lead. If you don’t know how old your home is, assume there is lead.

**Cover bare soil:** Lead in soil can pose a risk to small children, so it’s best not to allow your child to play in the dirt next to your home. As an alternative, consider planting grass over bare soil, or use mulch or wood chips. And leave shoes at the door to prevent tracking contaminated soil into your home.

### Be smart before you

**start:** Don’t remodel or renovate until your home has been professionally inspected for lead. Home repairs such as sanding or scraping paint can create lead dust and make the problem worse. Learn about safe ways to make repairs and reach out to contractors who are lead-safe certified.

**Eat healthy:** Lead can interfere with your child’s growth and development and harm almost every system in their body. Eating a low-fat diet and a variety of foods that are high in calcium, iron and vitamin C can help your child absorb less lead.



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