

Fact Sheet

Lead



What is Lead?

Lead is a natural metal found in the environment. It is inexpensive and useful and can be found in the home. If lead is allowed to enter children's bodies it can cause serious long-term health problems.



How may a child be exposed?

Lead enters the body when children breathe, eat or drink substances containing lead. Lead does not break down. It remains toxic and will not disappear unless removed safely. Lead exposure can be acute or chronic (refer to information under 'Lead Poisoning').

The most common sources of lead exposure include:

Lead-based paint from buildings built before 1970. Lead paint has a sweet taste which is appealing to children.

Lead-based paint that is disturbed during renovation. Sanding lead based paint creates dust that can be inhaled or swallowed.

Lead flashing in roofing materials.

Contaminated water from pipes. Lead is used in the make up of both old and new taps. New plumbing may release low levels of lead for up to 5 years.

Urban exposure. Lead based fuel was banned in Australia in 2002. The lead contamination in soil, the environment and home, from previous heavy motor traffic in some urban environments, can still result in increased lead levels in children.

Lead is present in many common consumer products and can build up, over the years, in the soil of gardens and in the dust of ceilings in the home. This is particularly true of homes close to industries that produce or use lead.

Glazed pottery and lead crystal food containers.¹



Lead Poisoning

Lead Poisoning is the presence of elevated levels of lead in the blood. Symptoms may include:

Acute Exposure (a high level of exposure at one time)

- Muscle pains
- Abdominal discomfort
- Lethargy
- Headache
- Vomiting
- Fits
- Coma



Chronic Exposure (ongoing exposure)

- Learning disabilities



- Poor hearing
- Behavioural problems
- Poor school performance
- Poor co-ordination
- Impaired growth^{2,3}

How common is lead exposure?

At least 75,000 Australian pre-school children have elevated blood lead levels. Children under the age of four are at the greatest risk because:

- The developing brain is more sensitive to lead.
- Children absorb more lead, if swallowed, than adults.
- Children are more likely to eat non-food substances.
- Children have more hand to mouth contact.⁴



Australian Standard

The recommended safe blood lead level for Australian children is less than 10 µg/dL (0.48 µmol/L).⁵

If you think your child may have been exposed to lead please contact your general practitioner for further advice and a blood test.



Prevention of Lead Exposure

- Test for lead in any pre-1970 paint in your home and contact a professional for lead paint removal.
- Avoid homes and child care near any known lead industry.
- Limit the use and purchase of lead-based products and keep such products in secure places in the home.
- Vacuum and wet wipe your home environment regularly.
- Wash your children's hands regularly.⁶



Remember:

- Lead can be found in the home.
- Lead exposure can affect your child's development.
- Contact your general practitioner for further advice if you think your child may have been exposed to lead.



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¹ Lead Reference Centre, New South Wales Environment Protection Authority, Australia, Lead Poisoning Guide for Families Accessed via <http://www.leadpoison.net/prevent/guide-family.htm> Last accessed on 29th November 2005.

² Reith, D.M., O'Regan, P., Bailey, C. & Acworth, J. (2003) Serious Lead Poisoning in Childhood: Still a Problem After a Century Paediatric Child Health 39. 623-626.

³ Ringold, S. (2005) Lead Poisoning The Journal of the American Medical Association (293) 18. 2304.

⁴ Lead Advisory Service, Australia (1997) How Would You Know if You or Your Child is Lead Poisoned? Lead Action News Accessed via <http://www.lead.org.au/fs/fst3.html> Last accessed on 29th November 2005.

⁵ National Health & Medical Research Foundation, New South Wales Government Extract: Recommended lead levels in Australian children Accessed via <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/eh8.htm> Last accessed on 29th November 2005.

⁶ Lead Advisory Service, Australia (1997) The Main Sources of Lead Accessed via <http://www.lead.org.au/fs/fst2.html> Last Accessed on 29th November 2005.

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