



LEAD FACT SHEET

What is lead?

Lead is a naturally occurring bluish-gray metal found in small amounts in the earth's crust. It has no special taste or smell, and can be found in all parts of our environment. Most of it comes from mining, manufacturing, and the burning of fossil fuels. Among lead's many uses have been in batteries, metal products such as solder and pipes, and roofing materials.

How dangerous is lead?

In 1991, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services called lead the "number one environmental threat to the health of children in the U.S." Lead affects practically all systems within the body. Exposure to lower levels of lead can adversely affect the brain, central nervous system, blood cells, and the kidneys. At high levels, it can cause convulsions, coma, and even death. Most severe are the effects of lead exposure on fetuses and young children. These include delays in physical and mental development, lower IQ levels, shortened attention spans, and increased behavioral problems. Fetuses, infants, and children are more vulnerable to lead exposure than adults since lead is more easily absorbed into growing bodies, and the tissues of small children are more sensitive to the damaging effects of lead.

What are the most common ways of being exposed to lead?

There are many ways that people are exposed to lead: through air, drinking water, food, contaminated soil, deteriorating paint, and dust. Airborne lead enters the body when an individual breathes or swallows lead particles or dust once it has settled. Old lead-based paint is the most significant source of lead exposure in the U.S. today. Harmful exposures to lead can occur when lead-based paint is improperly removed from surfaces by dry scraping, sanding, or open flame burning. High concentrations of airborne lead particles in homes can come from lead dust from outdoor sources, including contaminated soil tracked inside, and from the use of lead in certain indoor activities such as soldering and stained-glass making.

What are some ways I can reduce my family's exposure to lead?

Keep areas where children play dust-free and clean -- Mop floors and wipe window ledges and chewables surfaces such as cribs with a solution of powdered dishwasher detergent in warm water. Most cleaners will not remove lead in ordinary dust. Wash toys and stuffed animals regularly. Make sure that children wash their hands before meals, nap time, and bedtime.

Reduce the risk from lead-based paint -- Most homes built before 1960 contain heavily leaded paint, as well as some homes built as recently as 1978. This paint could be on window frames, walls, the outside of homes, or other surfaces. Do not burn painted wood since it might contain lead.

Leave lead-based paint undisturbed if it is in good condition -- Do not sand or burn off paint that may contain lead. Lead paint in good condition usually is not a problem except in places where painted surfaces rub against each other and create dust, like opening a window.

Do not remove lead paint yourself -- Individuals have been poisoned by scraping or sanding lead paint because these activities generate large amounts of lead dust. Home test kits, though affordable, cannot detect small amounts of lead under some conditions. Hire a person with special training for correcting lead paint problems to remove lead-based paint. Occupants, especially pregnant women, should leave the building until all work is finished and clean-up is done.

Find out about lead in drinking water -- Most well and city water does not usually contain lead. Water usually picks up lead inside the home from household plumbing that is made with lead materials. The only way to know if there is lead in drinking water is to have it tested. Contact the Alexandria Health Department (838-4400 ext. 265) or the Virginia American Water Authority (549-7080) to find out how to get the water tested.

How can I find out more about lead?

For more information, you can call the City of Alexandria's Office of Environmental Quality, at 703-746-4065.

You can also contact the EPA's toll-free lead number, at 1-800-LEAD-FYI, for information on obtaining some of their brochures or getting a listing of certified lead removal contractors.

For information on lead in water, call the Safe Drinking Water Hotline at 1-800-426-4791.