



Lead Poisoning Information for Staywell Members

What Is Lead Poisoning?

Lead is a metal which can poison humans. It is not normal to have lead in your body, but a small amount is present in most people. Lead poisoning occurs when you take in too much lead. This can happen by breathing or swallowing something that has lead in it. This could be thing like food, dust, paint or water. In children, too much lead in the body can cause problems in growth and development, including:

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

In adults, lead poisoning can cause serious health problems. These include high blood pressure and damage to the brain, nervous system, stomach and kidneys. Too much lead can damage almost every organ system.

What Causes Lead Poisoning?

Lead poisoning is usually caused by being around small amounts of lead over a long period of time. This can happen at home, work or day care. It can also happen quickly if you are near a high amount of lead.

There are two common ways that children are near lead. One is from being near paint with lead in it. The other is from being around dust and soil that have lead in them. Both of these are common in older homes and buildings. About 25 percent of all buildings in the U.S. have lead paint dangers like these. Toys and jewelry made in other countries can sometimes have high amounts of lead. The Consumer Product Safety Commission keeps a list of products that have been recalled because they are dangerous. You can see the list on their Web site at www.cpsc.gov.

Adults are most often exposed to lead in the workplace. Or while doing hobbies. Those who work with lead are at a higher risk of lead poisoning. This includes people who do work at jobs like metal smelters, welders, or pottery makers.

Other sources of lead exposure include:

- Air, water or soil that has lead in it.
- Things used for hobbies. These can be stained glass, models made with lead, gun ammo or shooting at indoor ranges.
- Some rare medicines and drugs. For example, 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 are around some small amount of lead. New rules have helped reduce lead exposure in the U.S. But it is still a major health risk. This is very true for young children. It is thought that lead poisoning affects about 310,000 children in the U.S.

What Are the Symptoms?

There may be no signs of lead poisoning that you notice. This is because the signs are hard to see. Or they may look like other problems. When the lead poison level is very high, signs may be problems with digestion, being tired and headaches. Children who get lead poisoning over a long period of time may show other signs. They may not be quite as smart as other children their age. They may also be smaller in size than other children their age. There may also have problems with behavior. Some of these signs are being cranky or aggressive and overactive. There may also be learning difficulties, a lack of energy, and loss of appetite.

Adults may also show changes in how they act. This could include being cranky. There may be mood and personality changes. Sleep patterns could change. It may be hard to concentrate. Some suffer, memory loss. At high levels, lead can affect the central nervous system. This can lead to poor coordination, weak hands and feet, and headaches. In severe cases, there can be convulsions, paralysis and comas.

How Is Lead Poisoning Diagnosed?

A lead blood test measures the amount of lead in the blood. But this test does not measure all the lead in the body. Urine tests for lead can give information about the total lead in the body. This is often done before starting treatment to remove lead. Finding lead poisoning is hard. This is because the signs can be caused by many diseases. Most children with lead poisoning do not show any signs until their blood lead levels are very high.

How Is It Treated?

To treat lead poisoning, the source of lead must be removed. Also, you should eat a balanced diet. Good nutrition, especially getting the right amount of iron, helps your body prevent lead from being absorbed. Often this treatment is enough to reduce lead levels in the body. If this does not work or if lead levels are very high, there is another treatment. It is called chelation therapy. This involves taking drugs that stick to lead in the body. They help speed the lead through the kidneys to remove it from the body.

Make sure that children are not near lead. The best way to do this is to keep children out of buildings that have lead-based paint. Keep them away until the lead has been either removed or sealed away. Make sure the building is certified by professionals to be free of lead.

Who Is at Highest Risk of Lead Poisoning?

Lead poisoning can occur at any age. But children are most likely to get it. Children who are at highest risk for lead poisoning are those who:

- Live in homes or buildings built before 1978. The biggest risks are those built before 1950. This is 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 most at risk for lead poisoning because they:
 - Put their hands and objects in their mouths.
 - Sometimes swallow nonfood items.
 - Absorb lead more quickly through their stomachs.
 - Have brains that are growing fast.

Your doctor should do one or more lead screening tests before your child is 2 years old.

Also, lead exposure or lead poisoning may occur in:

- People who have drinking water that flows through pipes soldered with lead.
- Adults who work with lead either in their job or as a hobby. This could be metal smelters, pottery makers or stained glass artists.
- People who eat food from cans made with lead solder. These cans are made outside the U.S.
- People who use ceramic containers for cooking or storing food or beverages. Some ceramic glaze contains lead that may have been improperly fired or cured.
- People who eat or breathe folk remedies that contain lead. This includes some herbs and vitamins from India.
- People who live in areas with heavy factory pollution.

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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