

## Information Sheet

# Lead Poisoning

### *What is lead?*

Lead is a soft, dense metal used to make many products. It may be found in fishing weights, bullets, ceramic dishes, glassware, car batteries, electronics, and old plumbing, among other things. Years ago, it was added to gasoline and to paint. (Lead was banned from gasoline in 1995 and from paint in 1978.)

### *What is lead poisoning?*

Lead can get into the body, especially if it is swallowed, but it cannot easily get out. Lead can build up in the body and damage many organs, especially the nervous system, brain, and kidneys. Children under age 6 are especially at risk because their bodies and organs are growing so fast. Any lead that gets into their bodies is absorbed by their organs very easily.

Lead poisoning in children can cause stomach aches, irritability, learning disabilities, behavior problems, and hearing problems. Lead poisoning in adults can cause abdominal pain, kidney problems, and reproductive problems.

At very high levels it can cause seizures, coma, and even death.

**FACT:** An estimated 890,000 U.S. children (13,800 Virginia children) under age 6 have enough lead in their bodies to possibly affect their health.

**FACT:** Much of the time, a person with lead poisoning does not look or feel sick.

### *Who is at risk?*



People living in homes built before 1978 are most at risk, especially children living below the poverty line. Their homes often have old, peeling chips of lead-paint that young children may eat. Scraping or sanding lead paint can also release invisible lead dust. This dust settles on floors, windowsills, and other surfaces. From there, it easily gets onto children's hands or toys and into their mouths. *Lead dust is the number one source of childhood lead poisoning.*



Adults may be at risk if their home, job, or hobby regularly exposes them to lead dust or the fumes from melted lead.



When a pregnant woman is exposed to lead, it could harm her baby.

### **What else might cause lead poisoning?**

Below is a list of items that might cause lead poisoning if they are swallowed:

- Fishing weights or lures
  - Bullets or buckshot
  - Musket balls
  - Curtain weights
  - Candy from Mexico
  - Costume jewelry
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- Handcrafted or foreign ceramic dishes may contain lead that can get into food or drink.
  - Old plumbing in a house may contain lead that can get into the drinking water.
  - Certain folk medicines and foreign cosmetics can contain lead. Examples are *azarcon*, *greta*, *kohl*, and *pay-loo-ah*.

### **What can parents do to prevent childhood lead poisoning?**

- Ask your doctor or health department if your child should be tested for lead. The test is simple and quick, and covered by many health plans. Young children enrolled in Medicaid can get free lead tests.
- Keep your home free of lead dust and paint chips. Wash floors and other surfaces with soap and water. Wash children's hands, pacifiers, and toys frequently.
- If you are exposed to lead at work, change clothes and shower before coming home. Wash work clothes separately from the family laundry.
- Learn to work safely when renovating an old home. Consider hiring professional contractors who are qualified to work with lead-painted homes.
- Make sure your children eat regular, nutritious meals. Their bodies will be less likely to absorb lead.

### **Who can help?**

For concerns about someone who may have been exposed to lead, contact your doctor, your local health department, or The Blue Ridge Poison Center at 1-800-222-1222.

For information about working safely with lead paint or how to have your home tested for lead, contact the Lead-Safe VA Program: 1-800-532-3394 or <http://www.vahealth.org/leadsafe/>