

Lead Poisoning in Children

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Recently there has been a recall of toys from prominent toymakers such as Mattel and Fisher Price. These toys were recalled because they contained lead-based paint. This recall has brought about a renewed concern across the nation about lead poisoning. Many of us probably remember that lead poisoning was talked about a lot in the 80's and early 90's, but pediatric nurses still report finding high lead levels in children all across the nation. Lead, unfortunately, is still found in our paint, our soil, plumbing in older homes, and now in children's toys.

Because of this, many states do yearly screenings beginning at age 1 and continuing until the child is 3 or 4 years old. In addition to screening for routine lead levels, you should ask a doctor or nurse caring for a child you know and love to screen a child for lead if there are issues in school or a child is suspected of learning disabilities. Lead poisoning may be contributing to the problems; it may not be attention deficit disorder, as is usually thought.

If a child is found to have high lead levels, it is good to have a nutritional screen done to ask parents and or caregivers what the child is putting into his/her mouth. It is also important to do an environmental assessment to determine where the lead poisoning is coming from. Is the child eating paint chips or contaminated soil? Is the child crawling with wet fingers, pulling itself up on a windowsill that has lead dust on it, and then putting the fingers back into their mouth?

There are some prevention things that can be done. If lead is discovered on windowsills, they can be covered with duct tape or painted with lead-free paint. Children with low blood counts (anemia) more easily absorb the lead into their bloodstreams; they should eat more red meat to block this absorption. There are home test kits to check for lead. Children should also be instructed to wash their hands often throughout the day and parents can wet-mop or wet-sponge wherever lead is suspected. There are programs available through local Public Health Departments that can help you determine if you have lead in your home. It is quite common in older homes. If it is found, and you are renting your home, you will want to ask your landlord for help in removing the risks, the Public Health Dept should be able to help with that also.

Finally if the lead ingestion is significant, pills may have to be taken to help remove the lead from the child's system. You will usually see the lead levels drop in 6-8 weeks. If you are concerned that lead may be a problem for you or your family, please contact your health care provider or your local public health department.