Lead and Drinking Water

Frequently Asked Questions

Childhood lead poisoning is one of the leading environmental threats to the health of children. Protecting children from exposure to lead is important for their lifelong health.

What are the health effects of lead exposure?

There is no known safe level of lead exposure. Lead can cause serious health problems if too much enters the body. Lead is most dangerous for infants and children under 6 years old and pregnant women. In young children, lead exposure can cause lower IQs, hearing problems, problems with attention, hyperactivity, developmental delays, and poor classroom performance. At very high levels, lead can cause damage to the brain, red blood cells and kidneys. Pregnant women are also vulnerable to lead exposure. Lead can harm the developing fetus, causing lower birth weight and developmental delays.

What are common sources of lead exposure for children?

Children can be exposed to lead from a number of sources. Common sources of lead exposure include lead-based paint found in older homes and buildings, dust and soil contaminated with lead, and parents' occupations. Lead can also be found in a number of consumer products, including certain types of pottery, pewter, brass fixtures, foods, and cosmetics. The primary source of lead exposure for most children with elevated lead levels in their blood is lead-based paint.

Why should a child care center consider testing their drinking water for lead?

There are many sources of lead exposure in the environment, and it is important to reduce all lead exposures as much as possible. Lead exposure from tap water comes from the decay of plumbing or the solder that connects pipes. The risk is higher in older buildings. Water that remains in pipes overnight or when schools or child care centers are not in session stays in contact with lead pipes or lead solder and could contain higher levels of lead.

What are some steps parents and caregivers can take to protect their families?

- Be alert for chipping, flaking and peeling paint. Make sure painted surfaces are properly maintained.
- Use only safe interior paints on toys, walls, furniture, etc.
- Replace any vinyl mini-blinds made outside the United States with a type that is lead-free.
- Clean or remove your shoes before entering your home to avoid tracking in lead from soil.
- Clean your home regularly. Wipe down floors and other level surfaces with a damp mop or sponge.
- Find safe play areas (such as lead-free sand or grassy areas).
- Teach your children to wash their hands, especially before eating. Wash pacifiers and toys regularly.
- If your work or hobbies involve lead, change your clothes and shoes and shower when finished. Keep your clothes at work or wash your work clothes as soon as possible.

- Use cold flushed tap water for mixing formula, drinking, or cooking**.** If you are in an older home, run the water for several minutes before using it in the morning and start with cold water for drinking or cooking.
- Don't let children eat things that fall on the ground or chew on painted surfaces.
- Don't let children wear imported jewelry that may contain lead.
- You can get information from the Consumer Product Safety Commission about products that are recalled due to lead.

Who should be tested for lead poisoning?

The Tennessee Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program recommends blood lead testing for the following children:

1. Children at 12 and 24 months old*

2. Children 36-72 months old without a documented blood lead level*

3. Children whose parent/guardian requests a blood lead level.

4. Children whose parent/guardian answers "yes" or "don't know" to any questions on the risk assessment questionnaire used at well-child checks between 6-72 months of age or when child's risk status changes.

5. All foreign-born children (such as recent immigrants, refugees, and international adoptees) should be screened for elevated blood lead levels within 90 days of arrival into the United States. Screening should be repeated **3-6 months later** after placed in permanent residence for children 6 months to 6 years of age. *Required for children with TennCare

Should children from an affected child care center be tested for lead poisoning?

The risk to an individual child from elevated lead in drinking water depends on many factors; for example, the child's age, weight, amount of water consumed, and the amount of lead in the water. Children may also be exposed to other significant sources of lead, including paint, soil and dust. Since blood lead testing is the only way to determine a child's blood lead level, parents should discuss their child's health history with their child's physician to determine if blood lead testing is appropriate. Pregnant women should also consider discussing this matter with their physician.

How can parents or caregivers learn more?

If parents believe their child has been exposed to lead, they should talk to their child's healthcare provider. The only way to know for sure if a child has been exposed to lead is with a blood test**.**

For information about the Tennessee Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program, go to: https://www.tn.gov/health/health-program-areas/mch-lead.html

For general information about lead in drinking water, go to:
https://www.epa.gov/ground-water-and-drinking-water/basic-information-about-lead-drinking-water

For information about testing for lead in child care center drinking water, go to:
https://www.tn.gov/health/cedep/environmental/safe-places/safe-operation/drinking-water.html