

# Lead, your health and the environment

Lead is a metal which, because it is cheap and useful, is found in many products and in many places in the environment.

Lead entering our bodies may cause serious long-term health problems, especially for young children. So it is important that you know about lead poisoning and how it is caused – especially if you're a parent or plan to be one.

You can take many simple actions that will protect your family from lead. You need to reduce lead in and around your home and make sure it doesn't get into your child's body or your own.

## Who is most at risk?

Lead can affect anybody, but children under the age of four and pregnant women are most at risk. The poisonous effects of lead can damage the developing brain and nervous systems of unborn and young children much more easily than adults.

Adults with jobs that involve lead, home renovators or people using lead in hobbies may also be at risk. Workers in lead industries may bring lead dust home on their clothes which can affect the family's health.

People who live near lead industries are more exposed than others. However the danger can occur anywhere through old paint and dust in older buildings. Before 1970, house paints contained higher levels of lead – now levels are very small.

## What lead does to your health

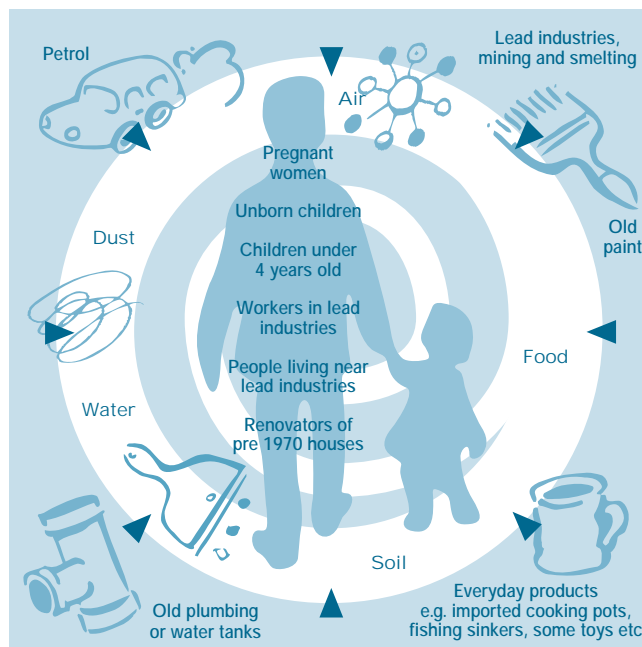
Lead can affect children by causing learning and attention problems, hearing loss, slowed growth, and bad behaviour. Lead can affect pregnant women and pass through the mother's body and harm the unborn baby.

Lead can affect other adults too. Low levels of exposure can cause joint and muscle pain, high blood pressure and infertility; higher levels (or lead poisoning) can cause memory loss, nerve problems and, at very high levels, fits.

## Are you at risk?

Because it is often difficult to see that symptoms of ill health are due to lead, the best way to check for lead poisoning is a blood test.

Blood tests can be done by your doctor or community nurse and the cost of the test is covered under Medicare.



Sources of lead contamination

## How lead gets into people

We come into contact with lead every day, mostly in our homes and yards, and in the workplace.

As lead is almost everywhere, all Australians will come into contact with sources of lead such as old paint, industrial and car pollution, building materials and products we use every day. The diagram at left shows the main sources of lead.

Lead gets into our bodies when we breathe in air which has lead dust in it, or we eat food or water which contains lead. If breathed in or eaten often enough, small amounts of lead can build up in the body and cause health problems for you and your family.

## What you can do

### *Eat a balanced diet*

Children or adults without enough iron, zinc or calcium or who have high fat diets absorb more lead.

Iron is in: eggs, lean red meat and poultry, liver, fish, cereals, beans, peas, lentils, dark green leafy vegetables.

Zinc is in: wheat bran, yeast products, red meat, oysters and crab.

Calcium is in: milk, cheese and yoghurt, tahini, bean curd, canned fish with edible bones.

Feed children meals and healthy snacks regularly – lead is more easily absorbed on an empty stomach.

Make sure children wash hands and faces before they eat or have a nap.

### *Reduce dust in the house*

Don't sweep, but wet-wash floors, stairs and windows with detergent, then rinse with clean water.

Seal up cracks, cavities, ceiling roses and some vents to stop dust accumulating or leaking into rooms.

Professionals should thoroughly clean ceiling cavities with a special vacuum cleaner (called a HEPA). Don't do this work yourself.

### *Keep kids' play areas safe*

Move play areas away from bare soil near the house and try to keep kids out of the dirt.

Grass or put plants over bare areas of dirt.

Keep kids' dummies, toys and pets clean.

### *Check for peeling or deteriorating paint in your home if it was built before 1970*

Block holes into the roof space as a short-term measure.

Cover small areas of peeling paint with furniture.

It is better to cover old lead paint than remove it unsafely.

Get a professional experienced in lead-safe work to remove old paint. Don't try to remove it yourself. If you do decide to remove it yourself, take full precautions (see below for HOW TO GET ADVICE).

### *Take care if renovating a house built before 1970*

Pregnant women and children should move out during renovations until the clean-up is finished.

Don't use blowtorches on lead paint as they create fumes containing lead.

Power sanders produce large amounts of lead dust that contaminates the house. Wet the surface to be



## Preventing lead hazards in the home

sanded to reduce dust and keep lead paint dust within work areas by sealing off with plastic sheeting.

Use safety masks and coveralls to prevent exposure if creating lead dust or fumes.

Always dispose of waste in sealed plastic bags in your rubbish disposal. Clean up with a wet mop and water before pregnant women and children return.

### *Protect yourself from lead at work*

Wash hands, face and hair, and change clothes before you get in the car or come home.

If you smoke, don't carry cigarettes in the workplace or smoke in the workplace, as you can breathe in lead dust in the cigarette smoke. Wash hands before smoking, to stop lead on your hands entering your mouth.

Wash work clothes separately from all other clothes and rinse the washing machine afterwards.

## How to get advice

Ask your doctor if you want to know more about blood tests or the effects of lead on health.

For information on lead and the environment call:

Environment Protection Authority (EPA)  
Pollution Line on 131 555

For further information and advice about protecting yourself from lead, qualified paint inspection and removal services, and guidelines for safe home renovation, call:

Lead Advisory Service NSW  
1800 626 086 or (02) 9716 0132

**This program has been developed by the Lead Reference Centre and is supported by the NSW Environment Protection Authority, NSW Health, NSW Department of Housing, Department of Public Works and Services, Roads and Traffic Authority and the WorkCover Authority.**

Information correct at September 1997.

**LEAD  
EDUCATION  
PROGRAM**