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Lead Poisoning

What Is Lead Poisoning?

Lead poisoning happens when too much lead gets into the body through the skin or from breathing, eating, or drinking. When lead gets in the body, it can travel and cause harm wherever it ends up.

Who Gets Lead Poisoning?

Lead is toxic to everyone, but unborn babies and young children (6 months to 3 years) are at greatest risk for health problems from lead poisoning. Young children absorb lead more easily than older kids and adults, and lead is more harmful to them.

Kids at risk for lead poisoning include those who:

- immigrate to the US or are adopted from a foreign country without regulations for use of lead
- have pica (cravings to eat things like dirt and paint chips)

Why Is Lead Harmful?

Lead can harm production of blood cells and the absorption of calcium needed for strong bones and teeth, muscle movements, and the work of nerves and blood vessels.

High lead levels can cause brain and kidney damage.

How Do Children Get Lead Poisoning?

The most common way that kids get lead poisoning is from lead-based paint. This type of paint was used in many U.S. homes until the late 1970s, when the government banned the manufacturing of paint containing lead.

Kids also can come into contact with lead through:

- soil found near busy streets and around homes that were painted with lead-based paint
- water that flows through old lead pipes or faucets
- food stored in bowls glazed or painted with lead, or imported from countries that use lead to seal canned food
- some toys, jewelry, hobby, and sports objects (like stained glass, ink, paint, and plaster)
- some home remedies, such as greta and azarcon (used to treat an upset stomach)

What Are the Signs & Symptoms of Lead Poisoning?

Some children have no signs of being sick. Others may have symptoms like:

- headaches
- behavioral problems and trouble concentrating
- loss of appetite
- weight loss
- nausea and vomiting
- constipation
- a metallic taste in the mouth
- feeling tired
- muscle and joint weakness
- looking pale

How Is Lead Poisoning Diagnosed?

A simple blood test can diagnose lead poisoning. Doctors get the blood by pricking the finger or putting a small needle into a vein. Blood tests to check for lead in the body should be done when kids are 1 and 2 years old.

How Is Lead Poisoning Treated?

Treatment for lead poisoning depends on how much lead is in the blood. The most important part of treatment is preventing more exposure to lead. A child with a small amount of lead often can be treated easily. As the body naturally gets rid of the lead, the level of lead in the blood falls.

Kids with severe cases and extremely high lead levels in their blood will be hospitalized to get a medicine called a chelator. The chelator attaches to the lead and makes the lead weaker so the body can get rid of it naturally.

Calcium, iron, and vitamin C are important parts of a healthy diet and also help to decrease the amount of lead the body absorbs. Your doctor may recommend your child take supplements if there's not enough in his or her diet.

How Can We Protect Our Family?

To help protect your kids from lead poisoning by:

- Keep your home lead-free. Ask your local health department about having your home checked for lead sources.
- Ask your doctor about having your kids tested for lead exposure. If a child has lead poisoning, all siblings should be tested.
- Be wary of old plumbing that might be lined with lead. If you have an old plumbing system (in homes built before 1970), which used copper pipes and lead solder, you may want to get your water tested. Call your local health department or water department to find a laboratory that will test your water for lead content.
- If the water from the cold faucet has not been run for several hours, let cold water run for 30 seconds before drinking it. And because hot water absorbs more lead than cold water, don't use hot tap water for meals.
- Wash your kids' hands and toys often, and keep dusty surfaces clean with a wet cloth.
- Make sure that iron and calcium are in your diets. If kids are exposed to lead, good nutrition can reduce the amount absorbed by their bodies. Eating regular meals is helpful because lead is absorbed more during periods of fasting.
- Know where your kids play. Keep them away from busy roads and the underside of bridges.

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