Lead Safe

A guide to keeping your family safe from lead
Acknowledgements

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Lead Safe: A guide to keeping your family safe from lead

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Lead and your family's health

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’s important that you know about lead poisoning and how it is caused – especially if you are a parent, or plan to be one.

You can take many simple actions that will protect you and your family from lead.

Who is at risk

While lead can affect anybody, some people in the community are more at risk than others. This can be due to:

• your health (particularly if you are pregnant or have a poor diet)
• your age
• your job or hobbies
• your home (its age and condition)
• where you live (such as near lead industries)

Why each of these groups are at greater risk is discussed on the next page.

Categories of at-risk groups

Any of the listed groups can be at low or high levels of risk depending on individual circumstances and the influence of the factors listed above.

Source: Lead Reference Centre, 1997

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<th>Range of Risk</th>
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</tr>
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<td>products containing lead</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adults not in high or medium categories</td>
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</table>

Some people may be exposed to lead in more ways than one. For example, a person may work in a lead industry and be renovating a pre-1970 home which contains lead paint.
Pregnant and breastfeeding women

Pregnant and breastfeeding women can pass lead on to their babies. Care must be taken to avoid exposure to lead during pregnancy and breastfeeding. All people store lead in their body - mainly in the bones. As women's bodies change during pregnancy, previously stored lead can be released from the bones and affect the health of the developing foetus. This can be serious if the woman has high lead levels and is not eating enough calcium, iron or zinc.

There is some evidence that lead can increase the risk of pre-term delivery, low birth weight, miscarriage and stillbirth.

Young children are at greater risk

The toxic effects of lead are particularly damaging to the foetus and children under four. This is because:

- their developing brain and nervous systems are more vulnerable
- children absorb a much higher proportion of lead than adults if it is swallowed - up to 50 per cent compared to 10 per cent in adults
- normal behaviours in young children (e.g. hand-to-mouth activity, crawling, chewing on objects) makes them more likely to find and swallow lead if their surroundings are contaminated.

Children who constantly eat non-food substances (e.g. dirt) are at even greater risk.

Workers in lead industries

People with jobs which use lead are at most risk as they can be exposed to high levels of lead over a long period of time. They can breathe in or accidentally eat lead-contaminated food, water etc. Smokers can breathe in lead dust that has settled on their cigarettes.

If you work in a lead industry, you may bring lead dust home on your clothes or tools, or in your car, and contaminate your house and family.

Work hazards

Occupations most at risk include:

- automotive body or radiator repairers
- battery recyclers or manufacturers
- brass or copper foundry workers
- bridge, tunnel and tower workers
- building, construction and demolition workers (including painters, plumbers and pipe fitters)
- cable repairers
- lead mining, smelting and processing
- paint factory workers
- petrol refinery/service station workers
- scrap metal merchants
- welders/metal workers.

Home renovators

Nearly all houses built before 1970 contain lead paint. Some types of paints manufactured before 1970 contained up to 50% lead. After 1970 levels dropped, but may still be dangerous if disturbed during renovations. The house paint you buy now has only a small amount of lead in it (about 0.25%).
However, some types of industrial or special use paints (road marking, marine, automotive, signpainting etc) still use lead – check the label.

If you’re renovating a home which was painted with old lead paint, adults, children or pets can easily breathe in or swallow lead dust and particles if precautions are not taken.

People living near lead industries or main roads

People who live near industries which produce or use lead can be exposed to more lead than others, as lead dust and other emissions in the air may fall onto their homes and gardens.

People living or working near heavy traffic locations may be at higher risk, as exhaust from leaded petrol can contaminate the environment.

Inhaling fumes from leaded petrol causes small increases in blood lead level across the whole population, but falling use of leaded petrol since 1986 – and reduced amounts of lead in the petrol – continue to cut the risk of lead from petrol.

People whose hobbies use lead

Adults who have hobbies or carry out do-it-yourself activities which involve working with lead or lead paint can accidentally expose themselves to lead or contaminate their house.

Your children can be at higher risk if they play in or near your hobby work area.

Unsafe hobbies or activities

Hazardous hobbies or activities which can put adults and children at risk include:

- antique furniture restoration (old lead paint)
- boat and car building, repair and restoration (old lead paint and fumes and dust from solder)
- making lead fishing sinkers or ammunition (fumes when melting and casting lead)
- electronics (fumes from lead solder)
- lead lighting (fumes and dust from lead ‘cames’, lead glass paints and solder)
- indoor shooting (dust from the impact of bullets and fumes from firing)
- welding (lead paint on work surface and fumes).
Sources and exposures

Lead is found in many common consumer products and many places in the environment. Lead from these many different sources can enter and contaminate your home and surroundings (see diagram below).

Dust can penetrate soft furnishings like carpets and lounge chairs, curtains and your baby’s soft toys. It can build up over the years in the soil in your garden or in dust in your ceiling.

It can also remain as paint coating your doors, windowsills and children’s furniture such as cots and playpens.

Sources and pathways of lead in our environment

All Australians are exposed to many sources of lead (outer shaded area).

Pathways (white outer ring) transfer lead into our living environment.

Many different factors influence how much lead enters the body and what effect it can have on health.

Source: Lead Reference Centre, 1997
Sources of lead paint in pre-1970 houses

Source: Lead Reference Centre, 1997

The danger of lead paint

Nearly all cases of acute lead poisoning in children admitted to children’s hospitals in recent years have been attributed to home renovation activities. Pets are also at risk.

Lead becomes a danger when maintenance or renovation activities disturb existing lead paint or dust in the house, or create new hazards (see diagram on page 13).

Unsafe renovations where old lead paint is removed or prepared for overpainting are the most common cause of lead poisoning. Open-flame torches create dangerous fumes. Dry sanding without water creates lead dust. Fumes and dust can be breathed in, accidentally eaten and can contaminate the house, its contents and the surrounding area.

You can renovate safely if you take simple precautions and use the right equipment.

Lead-contaminated dust

Many older Australian homes and buildings have lead dust in their ceiling cavities, cavity walls and under the floor. This dust has built up over many years from many sources such as:

• industrial pollution from power stations, incinerators, car repair sites, mines and smelters
• exhaust emissions from the use of leaded petrol
• unsafe renovations and demolitions in your home or neighbouring properties
• pollution from wood-burning or coal-burning.

Demolition of walls, floors or ceilings can disturb lead paint and dust. Any work in ceiling cavities or under the floor which disturbs dust is hazardous. Once the dust is released into living spaces it contaminates soft furnishings, carpets, curtains, soil, food and water and is very difficult to remove.

There are many simple precautions you can take to reduce the hazard from lead dust.
Sources of lead for two-year-old children

Estimate of major contributions of lead to a two-year-old child in 1993. Dust and soil are the major contributors as children live in environments where dust is often found (e.g. on the floor, under furniture) and may have behaviours such as hand-to-mouth activity which increase levels of exposure.

Source: Adapted from the Australian Lead Development Association, 1994

Lead in the workplace

Breathing in lead particles or fumes is a particular hazard for workers in many industries which use lead or lead-based products.

Parents working in these industries can accidentally ‘take home’ lead dust on their work clothes, hair, skin and vehicles and pass it on to their children.

Other sources of lead

Petrol

Fewer cars using leaded petrol since 1986, and reduced amounts of lead in the petrol, continue to cause a decline in this source of lead, especially for people who live near main roads. Lead can enter the body when leaded petrol comes into contact with the skin.

Food

Food made and sold in Australia generally has low lead levels.

Root vegetables grown in lead contaminated soil or leafy vegetables covered in lead dust can be hazardous if eaten. Food stored, cooked, re-heated or served in lead-glazed ceramics or porcelain, leaded crystal or pewter can absorb lead.

Imported foods or beverages (particularly acidic foods) may be packed in cans with lead-solder side seams or processed by equipment containing lead soldering.

Water

Lead in drinking water is an uncommon source in NSW, although it may sometimes occur from corroded lead plumbing materials in the water supply or household plumbing.

Water from lead-soldered water tanks or run-off systems from roofing coated with lead paint can also be a source of lead. Dust and emissions near mining and smelting sites can add to the problem.
Consumer products containing lead
Some consumer products can contain lead:
• some PVC plastic products e.g. mini-blinds
• old toy soldiers
• some imported painted jewellery, buttons etc
• certain traditional medicines and remedies
  (including alarcon, alkohl, bala goli, ghasard, greta, maria luisa, pay-loo-ah, surma)
• some traditional cosmetics, including surma or kohl eye pencils, hair dyes and treatments
• some bone-meal calcium products.

Exposure – how lead gets into people
Lead gets into our bodies when we breathe in air which has lead fumes or dust in it, or if we
eat food or drink 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.

Adults can swallow lead through eating, smoking or nail-biting with lead contaminated hands,
particularly during unsafe renovations or working on hobbies which involve melting or casting
lead.

If you smoke, don’t smoke or carry cigarettes in the work area, as you can breathe in lead dust
which settles on them. Wash hands before smoking to stop lead entering your mouth.

Normal behaviours in young children (e.g. hand-to-mouth activity, crawling, chewing on objects)
make them more likely to find and swallow lead if their surroundings are contaminated,
particularly with lead dust.

Older children may deliberately swallow loose paint flakes or suck fingers or toys which have
come into contact with contaminated soil and dust. They can suck or chew window-sills, skirting
boards and door jambs coated in lead paint or dust.
Entry and storage of lead in the body

When lead enters the body it first appears in the blood.
If it does not pass through, it moves into soft tissues and then into teeth and bones.
Most lead is stored in the long bones
Source: Lead Reference Centre, 1997
Exposure to lead can have a broad range of health effects depending on the amount of lead and the length of exposure. Generally, the greater the exposure, the greater the impact on health, though children will be more affected at lower levels of exposure than adults.

'Mystery' symptoms – what to look for
The symptoms of lead poisoning may not be present, or may be mistaken for some other health or behaviour problem. They may be something of a mystery. The signs of high lead levels are similar in children and adults, but children show symptoms at lower levels than adults (see table on page 11).

If your child does display some of these symptoms, answer the questions on page 16 ('Ask Yourself'), check out your home or work environment for lead hazards and ask your doctor.

Behavioural and social problems
Excessive lead in children aged up to four years may cause learning disabilities, slowed growth, poor hearing and behavioural problems like hyperactivity and aggressiveness.

High levels of lead in children over four, teenagers and adults have been linked to poor performance at school and work, lower IQ, reading and vocabulary difficulties, problems with coordination and increased absenteeism.

The dangers of lead
Exposure to lead is linked to:

**PREGNANT WOMEN AND UNBORN CHILDREN**
- pre-term delivery
- low birth weight
- miscarriage and stillbirth.

**CHILDREN**
- damage to the brain and nervous system in children up to age 4
- impaired growth and IQ
- poor hearing
- learning difficulties
- hyperactivity and aggressiveness
- social and behavioural problems.

**ADULTS**
- loss of libido, infertility
- aggressiveness and higher blood pressure
- loss of appetite, constipation
- anaemia
- in severe cases, paralysis, fits, swelling of the brain, seizures, coma and death.
Symptoms of exposure to different lead levels

The table below shows the symptoms caused by 'moderate', 'severe' and 'medical emergency' levels of lead in the blood.

### Symptoms at a glance

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<th>SEVERE</th>
<th>MEDICAL EMERGENCY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Muscle pains</td>
<td>Joint pains</td>
<td>Partial paralysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prickly, itchy feeling</td>
<td>General fatigue</td>
<td>Paralysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mild fatigue</td>
<td>Poor concentration</td>
<td>Brain swelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressiveness</td>
<td>Tremor</td>
<td>Stupor or coma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irritability</td>
<td>Headache</td>
<td>Fits and vomiting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lethargy</td>
<td>Abdominal pain</td>
<td>Gum lead line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdominal discomfort</td>
<td>Constipation</td>
<td>Colic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weight loss</td>
<td>Death</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Testing for lead

It is often difficult to see that symptoms of ill health are due to lead. Tell your doctor about any possible exposure to lead you or your family may have experienced. Answer the questions on page 16 'Ask Yourself'. If you think there is a risk to you or your family, have a blood test – it is the best way to check for lead poisoning. The test shows how much lead is in the blood. The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommends a blood test if your children:

- are aged up to four years and live in or visit older dilapidated houses, or if they have been present during renovations of pre-1970 houses
- have brothers or sisters with high blood lead levels or if you work with lead
- have pica (habitual eating of non-food items e.g. dirt) particularly if living in pre-1970 housing
- are aged up to four years and live near an active lead mine, smelter, battery recycling plant or other industry likely to release lead
- live near heavy road traffic areas
- have developmental delays.

As an adult, you should also have a blood test if you have any of the symptoms above, especially if you work in industries or have hobbies which use lead.

Ask your doctor or health care professional about blood tests for lead. The cost of the test is covered under Medicare if you are at risk.
What you can do

The best solution to reducing lead hazards is to avoid being exposed in the first place.

If you are already being exposed then you must reduce your exposure. Find sources of hazards in the home and at work and eliminate them. Reducing hazards reduces exposure and risk.

Reduce or remove exposure to lead

This means stopping your or your children’s contact with lead; here are some suggestions:

• move children’s furniture, such as cots, away from surfaces with deteriorating paint
• make sure your children’s hands and faces are clean before they eat or have a nap
• discourage children from sucking dirty fingers or toys
• encourage children to play in grassy areas rather than places where dirt sticks to their fingers and toys; plant grass or ground cover on bare areas of soil
• wash fruit and vegetables before eating
• make sure children cannot touch peeling paint or ‘chewable’ surfaces painted with lead paint, especially cots, window-sills and windows; use tape or cover them up until they can be permanently fixed
• wash children’s toys (especially those used outside) and dummies frequently
• wash family pets frequently, especially if furry; don’t let pets sleep on children’s beds
• seal wood floors to reduce collection of dust between floor boards and to provide a cleanable surface
• wet-wash (at least weekly) hard surface halls, floors, stairs and windows with water mixed 4:1 with phosphate detergent, then rinse with clean water
• vacuum any carpets contaminated with lead dust slowly with a high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) vacuum (they can be hired) – not your domestic machine
• hose front steps and verandas, remove shoes at the door, and brush pets outside
• don’t store food in lead crystal glassware or pottery with lead-based glaze; beware of imported foods in cans with lead soldering.

When renovating

• Move out pregnant women and children.
• Remove carpet contaminated with paint or dust.
• Don’t use blowtorches or Sanders on lead paint.
• Contain lead paint dust within work areas.
• Protect yourself with safety masks or coveralls.
• If in doubt, have your house tested for lead and use professionals to clean it up.
Reducing lead hazards around the home

Source: Lead Reference Centre, 1997

Old lead paint
- Test paint in all parts of your house.
- Check your house for peeling or deteriorating paint if built before 1970.
- Protect yourself and your family during renovations.
- Prepare the work area and use the right equipment.
- Dispose of waste and clean up safely.

Lead Safe
Stop lead hazards from happening

If you’re renovating an older home, get a specialist to test for the presence of old lead paint. If you’re not sure or not planning to test it, then assume the paint has lead in it and take the necessary precautions. Children and pregnant women should be out of the home when lead removal is carried out, or when unsafe renovations which may disturb lead paint are going on. Other things you can do include:

- hire a professional experienced with lead-safe practices for renovation or building work that may disturb lead dust or paint
- remove or seal off soft furnishings before renovation or paint removal work and seal off work areas with plastic and taping to prevent contamination with paint flakes and dust
- ensure contractors clean the work area daily during renovations and thoroughly clean your home and dispose of debris before children or pregnant women return
- prevent the use of blowtorches, arc welders or high temperature heat guns which burn paint and create lead fumes
- avoid using abrasive or water blasting equipment if possible. Power sanders create large amounts of dust which can contaminate the house; if this equipment is to be used, the surface should be wet during the work and dust contained within the work area.

Eating well

Lead is absorbed more easily if your diet lacks essential minerals such as iron, calcium and zinc. To reduce the amount of lead the body absorbs if it is inhaled or swallowed, make sure your family – especially young children and pregnant women – has a diet low in fat and rich in:

- calcium (milk, cheese, yoghurt, nuts – especially almonds)
- iron (eggs, lean red meat and poultry, liver, fish, cereal, beans, peas, lentils, dark green leafy vegetables)
- zinc (wheat bran, yeast products, red meat and liver, oysters and crab).

Too much fat also aids lead absorption (but there is no evidence that a low fat diet minimises absorption). Frequent nutritious meals are important for children. Food in the stomach decreases the absorption of lead from non-food sources.

Seal up cracks

Dust in your home’s ceiling and wall cavities can contain lead. To reduce this hazard:

- Seal cracks, ceiling roses and some vents to stop dust leaking into rooms.
- Ask your hardware store for the best sealers and tools to do the job.
- Have the ceiling cavity thoroughly cleaned with a high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) vacuum cleaner, taking care to keep dust out of living areas below.

Fix up your yard

- Keep young children away from bare soil.
- Remove, turn over or mulch contaminated soil.
- Grass over bare areas of soil.
- Move children’s play areas to uncontaminated parts of the yard.
- Test the soil.
Don’t do-it-yourself

If you think your home may contain a lead hazard or lead paint, it is important to get professional advice and contractors. Do-it-yourself solutions could be more dangerous than leaving old paint in good condition alone.

Specialists are available to:
- check the lead content in paint, soil, dust and other materials
- assess the risk of lead hazards in your workplace or home
- abate, remove or control lead hazards.

See page 17 for organisations which can provide contact details of specialist trades people.

Reduce your exposure at work

NSW law requires employers to provide workers with a lead safe workplace. If you work in a lead industry:
- wash hands, face and hair, and change clothes before you finish work
- if you smoke, don’t carry cigarettes or smoke in the work area, 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
- contact an occupational health specialist if you’re concerned.

The WorkCover Authority has information on codes of practice to reduce your exposure to lead at work (see ‘Want more information?’ on page 17 for contact details).
Ask yourself...

If you think you or your family may have a health problem caused by lead, ask yourself the following questions.

### ABOUT YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD
1. Do you live near an active lead mine, smelter, battery recycling plant or other industry likely to release lead?  
2. Is your home on land which was previously used for industrial purposes?  
3. Is your home near a major road or traffic intersection?  
4. Are car parks or garages located close to entrances or windows in your home?  
5. Have older structures nearby – such as bridges, water tanks or towers – been renovated recently?

### ABOUT YOUR FAMILY AND FRIENDS
6. Does your child regularly visit a house with peeling or chipping paint built before 1970? (This includes day-care centres, pre-schools, homes of baby-sitters or relatives.)  
7. Does your child have pica, or chew or eat non-food items, or suck his/her thumb?  
8. Do you or your partner have a job or hobby which involves exposure to lead?  
9. Do you have pets (especially furry ones)?

### ABOUT YOUR HOUSE
10. Was your home built or painted before 1970?  
11. Have unsafe renovations been carried out recently?  
12. Has landfill been used in the grounds of the home?  
13. Are there old sheds or outbuildings still standing, or which have been demolished, which could have contaminated surrounding soil?  
14. Does your home have bare areas of soil or sandpits?  
15. Have unsafe renovations taken place in your home, without a thorough clean-up being carried out?  
16. Were carpets or other soft furnishings left uncovered during renovations?

If you answer YES to any of these questions ask your doctor if a blood lead test is necessary for you or your children.
Contacts

Ask your doctor or health care professional if you want to know more about lead illness.

For further information about the health effects of lead, qualified paint inspection and removal services, and guidelines for safe home renovation, call:

**Lead Advisory Service (NSW) PHONE 1 800 626 086 (Freecall) or 02 9716 0132**

For information on lead and the environment and copies of other Lead Safe publications, call:

**NSW Environment Protection Authority (EPA) Pollution Line PHONE 131 555**
or visit the Lead Safe Internet site at [www.epa.nsw.gov.au/leadsafe](http://www.epa.nsw.gov.au/leadsafe)

For information on sources of lead at work and how to reduce them, call:

**NSW WorkCover Authority PHONE 131 050**

Reading list

- **Interdepartmental Lead Taskforce**
  
  *NSW Lead Management Action Plan, NSW Environment Protection Authority, 1994*

- **Lead Action News**, Newsletter of the Lead Group Inc.
  
  Contact the Lead Group's Lead Advisory Service - 1800 626 086
  or check in your local library

- **Lead Safe Fact Sheet: Lead, Your Health and the Environment**
  
  Lead Reference Centre, 1997 (English)

- **Lead Safe Fact Sheet: Lead, Your Health and the Environment**
  
  Lead Reference Centre, 1997 (Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Macedonian, Spanish, Turkish, and Vietnamese)

- **Lead Safe Fact Sheet: Lead and Home Renovations**, Lead Reference Centre, 1997

- **Lead Safe Fact Sheet: Old Lead Paint**, Lead Reference Centre, 1997

- **Lead Safe Fact Sheet: Lead Safe Housekeeping**, Lead Reference Centre, 1997

- **Lead Safe Fact Sheet: Lead in Painting Dust**, Lead Reference Centre, 1997

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  *Lead is a Silent Hazard*, Walker and Co, 1994

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  *Control of Inorganic Lead at Work [NOHSC:1012 (1994)]*
  
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Notes