

Healthy Indoor Air Series

Lead Paint

Where is lead found in the home?

Lead-based paint was used in homes until the late 1970s, and was especially common before the 1950s. The most common places to find lead-based paint are areas where high durability was required: doors, doorframes, windows, woodwork, and furniture. Lead-based paint becomes a hazard when it starts to wear, chip, or peel or while it is being removed by sanding or stripping.

Lead-based paint is of primary concern to home remodelers and occupants of older homes, especially those families with children.

Exposure to lead can occur by ingesting paint chips, inhaling lead dust, or drinking water that has been contaminated when drawn through pipes with lead solder. In addition, the soil around homes near roads may be contaminated with lead from years of exposure to gasoline exhaust fumes.

Lead can get into the home environment from lead-based paint, dust contaminated with lead-based paint, soils contaminated with lead from paint, water, engines burning leaded gas, industrial uses of lead, lead-glazed ceramic pottery, lead solder on some food cans, and food products grown in lead-contaminated soils.

How does lead affect the human body?

The greatest health threat is inhalation or ingestion of the dust from lead-based paint as it wears and disintegrates.

Lead exposure can damage the central nervous system, and even at low levels it can affect system development. In children, this can result in lowered IQ scores, and birth defects can occur if pregnant women are exposed. A blood test can determine a person's blood-lead level.



How do you test for lead?

Lead-containing materials generally cannot be recognized by sight, and identification by special testing is needed.

Home lead testing kits can identify sources of lead in a home, but these may not detect low levels.

While a do-it-yourself test kit is not as definitive as a lab test, you may be able to do a screening test of suspect paint with a kit. A cigarette-sized “swab” contains separate glass vials of the leaching and indicating solutions. By squeezing the swab where indicated, the vials are broken and the chemicals can mix.

After shaking it for a few seconds and squeezing it, a drop or two of the yellow testing solution appears at the cotton tip. This is rubbed on an area of lightly sanded or cut paint.

If an unmistakable pink color forms on the tip of the swab or the surface being tested, then lead is present at a hazardous level.

How do you remove lead?

Lead-based paint, if in good condition and left undisturbed, may pose little health threat. But it may need to be covered or sealed to reduce exposure. Deterioration of lead-based paint increases the likelihood that the residents of the home will be exposed to the hazard. Dangerous levels of exposure increase when painted areas are disturbed during renovation.

Lead “abatement” (removal) is usually **NOT** a “do-it-yourself” activity. Careless removal can pose serious health risks.

Specialized, licensed lead abatement contractors are trained in the safe removal or encapsulation of this pollutant. Professional removal may be expensive.

Where can the lead test kit be used?

- Paint of any color on any surface
- Dinnerware and food cans
- Toys
- Solder and plumbing fixtures

How can you make your home safe?

- Test the paint to see if it is lead-based.
- Replace painted items without creating lead dust, if possible; for example, install a new door or molding.
- If the paint cannot be removed easily, cover it with new plaster, wallboard, or paneling.
- Remove the item from the home if you must strip the lead-based paint (for example, to maintain the historic integrity of molding).
- Avoid sanding, scraping, or burning lead paint.
- Call a reputable lead abatement professional to remove the paint.

For more information

Contact your local U of I Extension office or visit these web sites:

University of Illinois Extension
<http://www.solutions.uiuc.edu>

Healthy Indoor Air for America's Homes
<http://www.healthyindoorair.org>

Environmental Protection Agency
<http://www.epa.gov/lead>
or call the
National Lead Information Center at 1 (800) 424-LEAD



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