United States
Environmental Protection
Agency

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February 1995

Prevention, Pesticides, And Toxic Substances (7407)

EPA Lead Poisoning And Your Children

Lead awareness and your children

About one in eleven children in America have high levels of lead in their blood, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. You may have lead around your building without knowing it because *you can't see, taste, or smell lead.* You may have lead in the dust, paint, or soil in and around your home, or in your drinking water or food. Because it does not break down naturally, lead can remain a problem until it is removed.

Before we knew how harmful it could be, lead was used in paint, gasoline, water pipes, and many other products. Now that we know the dangers of lead, house paint is almost lead-free, leaded gasoline is being phased out, and household plumbing is no longer made with lead materials.

How lead affects your child's health

The long term effects of lead in a child can be severe. They include learning disabilities, decreased growth, hyperactivity, impaired hearing, and even brain damage. If caught early, these effects can be limited by reducing exposure to lead or by medical treatment. If you are pregnant, avoid exposing yourself to lead. Lead can pass through your body to your baby. The good news is that there are simple things you can do to help protect your family.

1. Get your child tested.

Even children who appear healthy may have high levels of lead. You can't tell if a child has lead poisoning unless you have him or her tested. A blood test takes only ten minutes, and results should be ready within a week.

✓ The Centers for Disease Control recommend that children be tested for the first time when they are a year old, or at six months if you think

your home has lead in it or if you live in an older building.

- ✓ Children older than one year should have a blood test every couple of years—*every* year if your house or apartment contains lead paint, or if you use lead in your job or hobby.
- ✓ To find out where to have your child tested, call your doctor or local health clinic.

2. Keep it clean.

Ordinary dust and dirt may contain lead. Children can swallow lead or breathe lead contaminated dust if they play in dust or dirt and then put their fingers or toys in their mouths, or if they eat without washing their hands first.

- ✓ Keep the areas where your children play as dust-free and clean as possible.
- ✓ Wash pacifiers and bottles after they fall on the floor. Keep extras handy.
- ✓ Mop floors and wipe window ledges and chewable surfaces such as cribs with a solution of powdered automatic dishwasher detergent in warm water. Do this twice each week. Wear gloves to avoid possible skin irritation. (Dishwasher detergents are recommended because of their high-phosphate content. Most multi-purpose cleaners do not

contain phosphates and are not effective in cleaning lead dust.)

- ✓ Wash toys and stuffed animals regularly.
- ✓ Make sure your children wash their hands before meals, nap time, and bed time.

3. Reduce the risk from lead paint.

Most homes built before 1960 contain heavily leaded paint. Some homes built as recently as 1978 may also contain lead paint. This paint could be on window frames, walls, the outside of your house, or other surfaces. Tiny pieces of peeling or chipping lead paint are dangerous if eaten. Lead paint in good condition is not usually a problem except in places where painted surfaces rub against each other and create dust. (For example, when you open a window, the painted surfaces rub against each other.)

- ✓ *Make sure your child does not chew on anything covered with lead paint, such as painted window sills, cribs, or playpens.*
- ✓ Don't burn painted wood. It may contain lead.

4. Don't remove lead paint yourself.

Families have been poisoned by *scraping or sanding lead paint* because these activities generate large amounts of lead dust. Lead dust from repairs or renovations of older buildings can remain in the building long after the work is completed. Heating lead paint may release lead into the air.

- ✓ Ask your local or state health department if they will test your home for lead paint. Some will test for free. Home test kits *cannot* detect small amounts of lead under some conditions.
- ✓ Hire a person with special training for correcting lead paint problems to remove lead paint from your home, someone who knows how to do this work safely and has the proper equipment to

clean up thoroughly. Don't try to remove lead paint yourself.

✓ All occupants, especially children and pregnant women, should leave the building until all work is finished *and a thorough cleanup is done.*

5. Don't bring lead dust into your home.

If you work in construction, demolition or painting, with batteries, or in a radiator repair shop or lead factory, or if your hobby involves lead, you may unknowingly bring lead into your home on your hands or clothes. You may also be tracking in lead from the soil around your home. Soil very close to homes may be contaminated from lead paint on the outside of the building. Soil by roads or highways may be contaminated from years of exhaust fumes from cars and trucks that used leaded gas.

✓ If you work with lead in your job or a hobby, change your clothes before you go home.

✓ Encourage your children to play in sand or grassy areas instead of dirt which sticks to fingers and toys. Try to keep your children from eating dirt, and make sure they wash their hands when they come inside.

6. Get lead out of your drinking water.

Most well or city water does not naturally contain lead. Water usually picks up lead *inside your home* from household plumbing that is made with lead materials. Boiling the water will not reduce the amount of lead. Bathing is not a problem because lead does not enter the body through the skin.

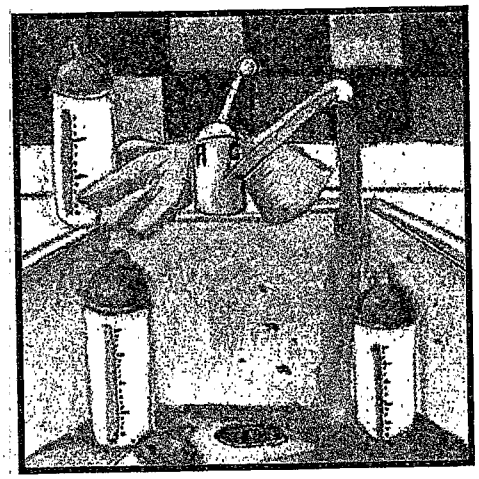
✓ *The only way to know if you have lead in your water is to have it tested.* Call your local health

department or your water supplier to see how to get it tested. Testing your water is easy and cheap ($15-$25).

✓ Household water will contain more lead if it has sat for a long time in the pipes, is hot, or is naturally acidic.

✓ If your water has not been tested or has high levels of lead:

1) do not drink, cook, or make baby formula with water from the hot water tap.



2) if the cold water hasn't been used for more than two hours, run it for 30 to 60 seconds before drinking it or using it for cooking.
3) consider buying a filter certified for lead removal. Call EPA's Safe Drinking Water Hotline for more information.

7. Eat right.

A child who gets enough iron and calcium will absorb less lead. Foods rich in iron include eggs, lean red meat, and beans. Dairy products are high in calcium.

✓ Don't *store* food or liquid in lead crystal glassware or imported or old pottery.

✓ If you reuse plastic bags to store or carry food, keep the printing on the outside of the bag.

Protect Your Children From Lead Poisoning

1 Get your child tested for lead poisoning, even if he or she seems healthy.

2 Clean floors and window sills with a solution of powdered dishwasher detergent and water. Most multi-purpose cleaners will not remove lead in ordinary dust.

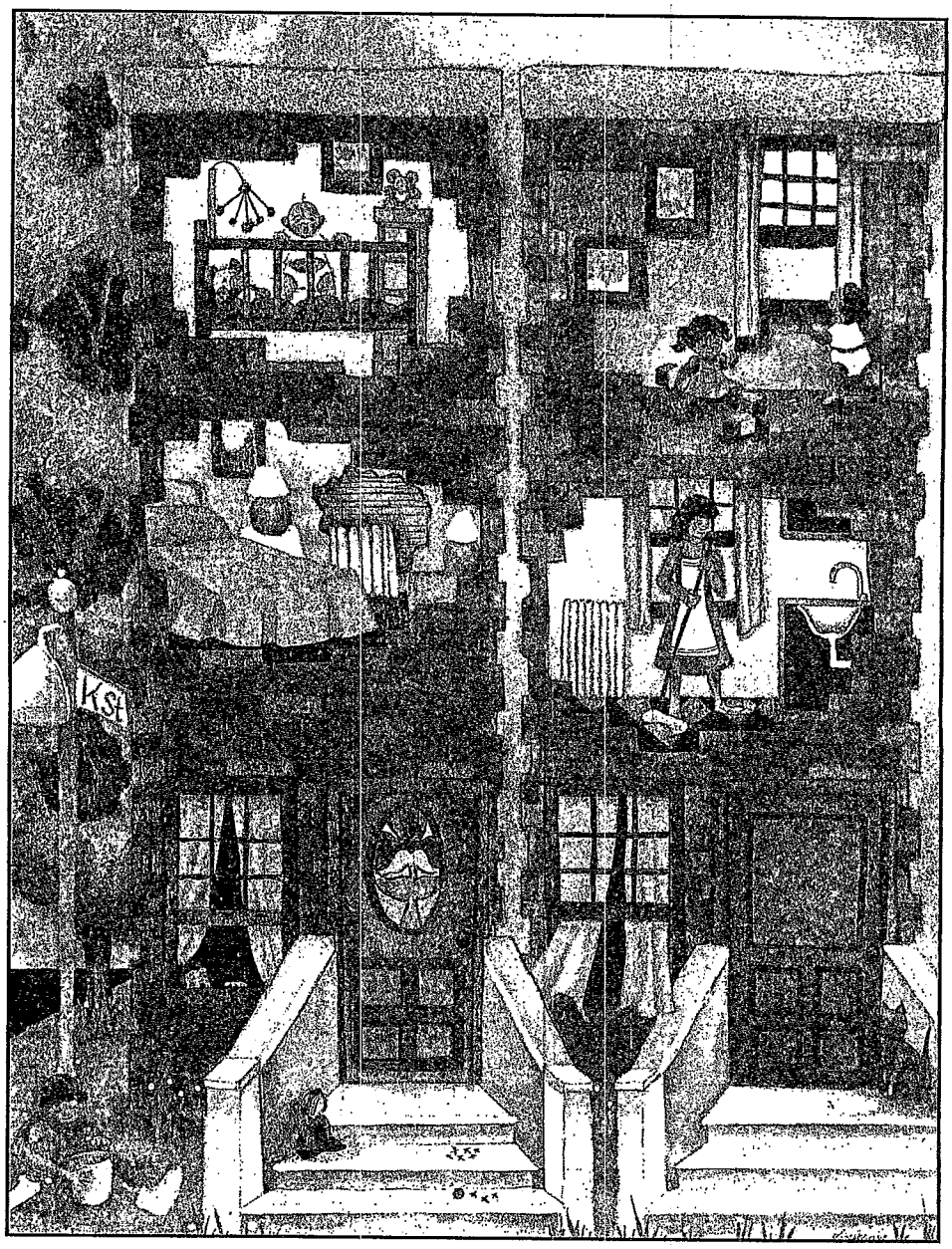
3 Reduce the risk of lead paint. Make sure your child is not chewing on anything covered with lead paint.

4 Don't try to remove lead paint yourself.

5 Don't bring lead dust into your home from work or a hobby.

6 Have your water tested. If the cold water hasn't been used for more than 2 hours, let it run for 30-60 seconds before drinking it or using it for cooking.

7 Eat right and don't store food in high-lead pottery.



Lead poisoning is a serious problem for young children—the younger the child, the greater the risk.

For More Information

EPA's Safe Drinking Water Hotline
(for information on laboratories certified to test for lead in water and for filter information)
1-800-426-4791

National Lead Information Center
(funded by the Environmental Protection Agency, Centers for Disease Control, Dept. of Housing and Urban Development, and Dept. of Defense)
1-800-LEADFYI
(except in the District of Columbia: 202-833-4726)

for local information, contact:

United States Environmental Protection Agency ● Office of Pollution Prevention and Toxics ● Office of Ground Water and Drinking Water

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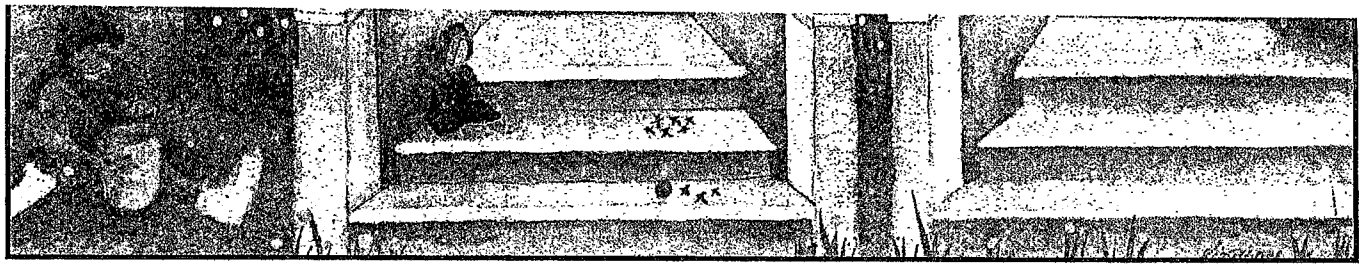

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