

# What is Lead Poisoning?

*Lead is part of our world today. It is found in the air, soil, dust and the paint of some homes or buildings built before 1978. Being exposed to too much lead can cause serious health problems. Lead is never a normal part of your body. The good news is that lead poisoning can be prevented. This fact sheet provides answers to some of the most commonly asked questions about lead poisoning.*

## **How can I be exposed to lead?**

Lead enters your body each time you inhale leaded dust or fumes, or swallow something that contains lead.

Exposure to lead may occur in several ways:

- Eating foods or drinking water that contain lead.
- Spending time in areas with deteriorating lead-based paint.
- Working in jobs where lead is used.
- Using traditional medicines that contain lead.
- Participating in hobbies that may use lead, like making stained glass or fishing with lead sinkers.

## **How can lead affect adults?**

The effects of lead are the same whether it enters the body through breathing or swallowing. The main target in the body for lead toxicity is the nervous system. Long-term, and high-level exposure of adults to lead can cause brain and kidney damage. High-level lead exposure in men and women can affect their reproductive health. A pregnant woman's exposure to lead can increase her risk for delivering her baby early, and for having a small baby.

## **How can lead affect children?**

Children are more vulnerable to lead poisoning than adults because their nervous systems are still developing. Children's bodies absorb more of the lead they take in than adult bodies. Babies and small children can swallow or breathe in lead from contaminated dirt, dust, or sand while they play on the ground or floor. These activities make it easier for children to be exposed because the dirt or dust on their hands, toys, or other items may contain lead. Children are also more sensitive to the effects of lead than adults. Even at low levels of exposure, lead can affect a child's learning, behavior and growth.

## **How can I tell if my child/family member has too much lead in their body?**

People with high levels of lead in their bodies often do not seem sick. The symptoms that might occur are very general and can happen for many reasons. Therefore, the only way to find out if there is too much lead in the blood is a simple blood test. Your local public health clinic or family doctor can do this test for you. It involves taking a sample of blood from your family member's finger or a vein in their arm. If the blood sample shows a problem with lead, more testing may be done. The best way to lower a high blood lead level is to prevent continued exposure to lead.

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