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ATSDR

LEAD

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This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about lead. For more information, call the ATSDR Information Center at 1-888-422-8737. This fact sheet is one in a series of summaries about hazardous substances and their health effects. It's important you understand this information because this substance may harm you. The effects of exposure to any hazardous substance depend on the dose, the duration, how you are exposed, personal traits and habits, and whether other chemicals are present.

HIGHLIGHTS: Exposure to lead can happen from breathing workplace air or dust, eating contaminated foods, or drinking contaminated water. Children can be exposed from eating lead-based paint chips or playing in contaminated soil. Lead can damage the nervous system, kidneys, and reproductive system. Lead has been found in at least 1,026 of 1,467 National Priorities List sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

What is lead?

(Pronounced lĕd)

Lead is a naturally occurring bluish-gray metal found in small amounts in the earth's crust. Lead can be found in all parts of our environment. Much of it comes from human activities including burning fossil fuels, mining, and manufacturing.

Lead has many different uses. It is used in the production of batteries, ammunition, metal products (solder and pipes), and devices to shield X-rays.

Because of health concerns, lead from gasoline, paints and ceramic products, caulking, and pipe solder has been dramatically reduced in recent years.

What happens to lead when it enters the environment?

- Lead itself does not break down, but lead compounds are changed by sunlight, air, and water.
- When lead is released to the air, it may travel long distances before settling to the ground.
- Once lead falls onto soil, it usually sticks to soil particles.
- Movement of lead from soil into groundwater will depend on the type of lead compound and the characteristics of the soil.
- Much of the lead in inner-city soils comes from old houses painted with lead-based paint.

How might I be exposed to lead?

- Eating food or drinking water that contains lead
- Spending time in areas where lead-based paints have been used and are deteriorating
- Working in a job where lead is used
- Using health-care products or folk remedies that contain lead
- Engaging in certain hobbies in which lead is used (for example, stained glass)

How can lead affect my health?

Lead can affect almost every organ and system in your body. The most sensitive is the central nervous system, particularly in children. Lead also damages kidneys and the reproductive system. The effects are the same whether it is breathed or swallowed.

At high levels, lead may decrease reaction time, cause weakness in fingers, wrists, or ankles, and possibly affect the memory. Lead may cause anemia, a disorder of the blood. It can also damage the male reproductive system. The connection between these effects and exposure to low levels of lead is uncertain.

How likely is lead to cause cancer?

The Department of Health and Human Services has determined that lead acetate and lead phosphate may reasonably

be anticipated to be carcinogens based on studies in animals. There is inadequate evidence to clearly determine lead's carcinogenicity in people.

How can lead affect children?

Small children can be exposed by eating lead-based paint chips, chewing on objects painted with lead-based paint, or swallowing house ducst or soil that contains lead.

Children are more vulnerable to lead poisoning than adults. A child who swallows large amounts of lead may develop blood anemia, severe stomachache, muscle weakness, and brain damage. A large amount of lead might get into a child's body if the child ate small pieces of old paint that contained large amounts of lead. If a child swallows smaller amounts of lead, much less severe effects on blood and brain function may occur. Even at much lower levels of exposure, lead can affect a child's mental and physical growth.

Exposure to lead is more dangerous for young and unborn children. Unborn children can be exposed to lead through their mothers. Harmful effects include premature births, smaller babies, decreased mental ability in the infant, learning difficulties, and reduced growth in young children. These effects are more common if the mother or baby was exposed to high levels of lead.

How can families reduce the risk of exposure to lead?

Avoid exposure to sources of lead. Do not allow children to chew or mouth painted surfaces that may have been painted with lead-based paint (homes built before 1978). Run your water for 15 to 30 seconds before drinking or cooking with it. This will get rid of lead that may have leached out of pipes. Some types of paints and pigments that are used as make-up or hair coloring contain lead. Keep these kinds of products away from children. Wash children's hands and faces often to remove lead dusts and soil, and regularly clean the house of dust and tracked in soil.

Is there a medical test to show whether I've been exposed to lead?

A blood test is available to measure the amount of lead in your blood and to estimate the amount of your exposure to lead. Blood tests are commonly used to screen children for lead poisoning. Lead in teeth and bones can be measured with X-rays, but this test is not as readily available. Medical treatment may be necessary in children if the lead concentration in blood is higher than 45 micrograms per deciliter (45 μg/dL).

Has the federal government made recommendations to protect human health?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that children ages 1 and 2 be screened for lead poisoning. Children who are 3 to 6 years old should be tested for lead if they have never been tested for lead before and if they receive services from public assistance programs; if they live in or regularly visit a building built before 1950; if they live in or visit a home built before 1978 that is being remodeled; or if they have a brother, sister, or playmate who has had lead poisoning. CDC considers children to have an elevated level of lead if the amount in the blood is 10 μg/dL.

The EPA requires lead in air not to exceed 1.5 micrograms per cubic meter (1.5 $\mu g/m^3$) averaged over 3 months. EPA limits lead in drinking water to 15 μg per liter.

The Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) develops regulations for workers exposed to lead. The Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990 banned the sale of leaded gasoline. The Federal Hazardous Substance Act bans children's products that contain hazardous amounts of lead.

Source of information

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 1999. Toxicological Profile for Lead. Atlanta: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service.

Where can I get more information? For more information, contact the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, Division of Toxicology, 1600 Clifton Road NE, Mailstop E-29, Atlanta, GA 30333. Phone: 1-888-422-8737, FAX: 404-639-6359. ToxFAQs Internet address via WWW is http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxfaq.html ATSDR can tell you where to find occupational and environmental health clinics. Their specialists can recognize, evaluate, and treat illnesses resulting from exposure to hazardous substances. You can also contact your community or state health or environmental quality department if you have any more questions or concerns.