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FACT SHEET

Lead Poisoning

What is Lead?

Lead is a toxic metal that can damage our bodies. It can be found in and around homes, in soil, and in some consumer products. Exposures to lead can cause lead poisoning, but lead poisoning can be prevented. <http://dhhs.ne.gov/publichealth/Pages/LeadIndex.aspx>

Cause: Toxic metals

Symptoms: Most children with lead poisoning do not have symptoms, but even low levels of lead can severely harm a child's nervous system and cause kidney damage. It can lead to learning and behavioral disabilities, decreased intelligence, speech/language problems, and muscle/bone growth problems. While low-lead exposure is most common, exposure to high levels of lead can have devastating effects on children, including seizures, unconsciousness, and, in some cases, death. Lead exposure can be dangerous for adults, too. Lead exposures during pregnancy can cause increased chance of illness, harm to a fetus, brain damage, or death. Fertility problems in men and women can happen. Other problems that can result from lead exposure include high blood pressure, digestive problems, nerve disorders, memory/concentration problems, and muscle and joint pain.

Exposure: Some children are more affected than others by a given blood lead concentration, will experience different levels of delay, and require different interventions (CDC 2002). People can get lead in their body by breathing in lead dust especially during building renovations that disturb painted surfaces, and through ingestion. Exposure can occur when people eat paint chips or soil that contains lead, or by putting hands or other objects covered with lead dust in their mouths. Women with a high lead level in their system prior to pregnancy could expose a fetus to lead through the placenta during fetal development.

Risks: Lead is most dangerous to children under the age of 6. At this age, children's brains and nervous systems are more sensitive to the damaging effects of lead because children's growing bodies absorb more lead. Babies and young children often put their hands and other objects in their mouths, increasing the chance of lead exposure.

Prevention:

In 1978 the Federal Government banned the use of lead-based paint. If your home was built prior to 1978, consider having your home checked for lead-based paint hazards. Have young children tested for lead, even if they seem healthy. Wash children's hands, bottles, pacifiers, and toys often. Make sure children eat healthy, low-fat foods. Regularly clean floors, window sills, and other surfaces. Wipe soil off shoes before entering house. Talk to your landlord about fixing surfaces with peeling or chipping paint. Take precautions to avoid exposure to lead dust when remodeling or renovating (call 1-800-424-LEAD for guidelines). Don't use a belt-sander, propane torch, high temperature heat gun, scraper, or sandpaper on painted surfaces that may contain lead. Don't try to remove lead-based paint yourself.

Diagnosis and Treatment:

A health care provider can perform a blood test to determine how much lead is present. There are two common ways to measure lead in the blood: a capillary blood test and a venous blood test. Any capillary test that is elevated should be confirmed with a venous blood test.