

Get the Facts: Lead

The Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) works to detect and address exposures to lead hazards. Through strategic inspections and abatement, as well as public education campaigns and testing, CDPH is leading efforts to permanently eliminate lead exposure to children. As a result, the number of children with elevated lead levels has declined from one in four tested in the late 1990's to less than one in 100 today. Here are some facts about lead in Chicago and tips for parents and guardians to help stop children from coming into contact with lead.

What are the health effects of lead?

When young children are exposed to lead, it can affect their growth, behavior, and development. When pregnant women are exposed to lead, it can affect their infants' brain and nervous system development.

How are most children in Chicago exposed to lead?

In Chicago, children are most likely to be exposed to lead while living or staying in older homes or apartments that have lead paint. Most homes built before 1978 (when lead paint was banned in the U.S.) have some lead paint on the inside and outside of the building. When old paint cracks and peels, it makes lead dust. Lead dust is so small you cannot see it or smell it. Children may get lead poisoning from swallowing or breathing in lead dust on their hands and toys.

What are other ways children can be exposed to lead?

Lead can also be found in soil, water, pots, containers, candy, folk medicine, cosmetics made in other countries, and some toys and toy jewelry. For up-to-date information on recalls of toys and other products that contain lead you can check <http://www.cpsc.gov/>.

What about lead in tap water?

When lead is found in household tap water, it comes from the plumbing in and near the home, not the local water supply. Water leaving the water treatment plant is free of lead. While the use of lead pipes was banned in 1986, lead can be found in older metal water taps, interior water pipes, solder connecting pipes, or pipes connecting a building to the main water pipe in the street. Lead found in tap water usually comes from the corrosion of these items. A corrosion inhibitor is added to Chicago's drinking water, which forms a coating on the inside of water service lines; however, if water is unused for long periods of time lead from plumbing or pipes can leach into the water.

Who is at greatest risk of lead poisoning in Chicago?

We worry most about young children (especially ages 0-3, but up to age 6) both because their brains are developing rapidly and because they are more likely to put their hands and objects contaminated with lead dust into their mouths. Children who live in older, poorly maintained homes or apartments or who have parents who are exposed to lead at work or through other activities are also at increased risk for lead poisoning.

How do I know if my child has lead poisoning?

A simple blood test is the only way to know if your child has lead poisoning. Most children who have lead poisoning do not look or act sick.

Should my child be tested for lead?

Yes. Because Chicago has many old homes, **every child living in Chicago** should be tested for lead through their healthcare provider's office. Children should be tested at 12, 24, and 36 months of age. Children between 3 and 6 years of age may also need to be tested. Additionally, children need to have proof of lead testing upon enrollment in day care and kindergarten.

What if my child does not have a regular healthcare provider?

If your family has a medical card as a part of the Medicaid Program, you are already assigned to a healthcare provider. If you don't know who your healthcare provider is you can call 1 (877) 912-8880. If you do not have health insurance, you can enroll your family by calling (773) 985-8055 or 1 (866) 311-1119.

I'm pregnant. Should I be tested for lead?

No, but women who are pregnant or nursing should consult with their healthcare provider if they have questions or concerns.

I am pregnant or have a young child. How do I know if my home is lead safe?

Find out when your home was built, as well as any other home where your young child spends a lot of time (like grandparents or daycare). If the housing was built before 1978, assume that the outdoor and indoor paint contain lead, unless tests show otherwise. Visit the Cook County Assessor's office at: www.cookcountyassessor.com to learn the age of your home. If you are interested in getting your home tested for lead, visit <https://data.illinois.gov/> and use the search term "lead inspector" to identify a state-licensed lead inspector. If you have concerns about lead in your tap water, call 311 or visit www.chicagowaterquality.org to request that your tap water be tested.

What can I do to protect my child from lead in soil or outside my home?

Prevent young children from playing in bare soil, which can contain lead. If possible, plant grass, cover bare soil with mulch or wood chips, or let children play in sandboxes. Remove shoes prior to entering the home.

My home was built before 1978 and I have a young child. What should I do if I see chipping/peeling paint?

Make sure your child is not around chipping or peeling paint or chewable surfaces (like windowsills). Take your child to their healthcare provider for a lead test. Until your home has been tested and safe environmental clean-up is completed, close and lock doors to affected areas, or put furniture in front of the area (do not put furniture in front of windows). Temporarily, you can also apply contact paper or duct tape to cover holes in walls or to stop children from chewing on lead-painted areas. Do NOT remodel or renovate until your home has been inspected for lead. Home repairs like sanding and scraping paint can produce dangerous lead dust. If you are interested in getting your home tested for lead, contact a state-licensed lead inspector.

What else can I do to protect my child from lead exposure inside my home?

Household dust is a major source of lead. Windowsills and window wells, in particular, can contain a lot of leaded dust. Clean your home weekly. Use a solution of water and cleaner to wet-mop floors and to wipe windowsills and other surfaces. Don't reuse cloths or sponges on dishes or counters. Don't dry-dust, sweep, or vacuum as these activities can spread lead dust. Remove shoes prior to entering the home. Wash hands and toys often with soap and water and always wash hands before eating and sleeping. When possible, windows should be shut to prevent abrasion of painted surfaces. In addition, parents who work in auto repair, construction, or plumbing, or who make stained glass or use firing ranges can carry lead dust on themselves. Shower and change clothes before interacting with young children.

How can I reduce exposure to lead in the tap water?

To reduce exposure to lead in the tap water, always use cold water from the tap for drinking, cooking, and making baby formula, as hot water is more likely to contain lead. Boiling water does not remove lead. After long periods of stagnation (6 hours or more without running water in your home or apartment), flush your water system. This can be done by running the tap for a minimum of 5 minutes, flushing the toilet, taking a shower, or doing laundry. You may consider purchasing and installing a filter that is certified to remove lead. If you have concerns about lead in your tap water, call 311 or visit www.chicagowaterquality.org to request that your tap water be tested. For more information, visit www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/tips/water.

What if I have my water tested and it shows elevated levels of lead in my tap water?

If your water test results show lead levels about 15 parts per billion (the 'action level' set by the Environmental Protection Agency), the City's Department of Water Management (DWM) will schedule a visit to your home, accompanied by a plumber and an electrician. DWM will evaluate your home to help determine the potential source of lead and recommend a plan of action to address it.

Are there any foods that help prevent lead poisoning?

Giving your child healthy foods is important for healthy development and is also helpful for preventing lead poisoning. Foods with calcium, iron, and vitamin C can help keep lead out of the body. Calcium is in milk, yogurt, cheese, and leafy green vegetables like spinach. Iron is in red meats, beans, peanut butter, and cereals. Vitamin C is in oranges, green and red peppers, and juice. Ask your doctor if you have questions about this.

What if I receive a report that my child has a high lead level?

If your child has a blood lead level of 5 micrograms per deciliter or greater, you and your doctor will receive a report. Talk to your doctor. Your child may need to go back to get a second lead test (for example, if the first blood test was done using a finger prick, your child may need to have blood drawn from the arm). If your child is under 6 years of age and has a blood lead level of 5 micrograms per deciliter or greater, the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) will contact you and will conduct a free home inspection. If you do not hear from CDPH, you or your doctor can call (312) 747-LEAD (5323).

What if my child has a high blood lead level and a home inspection finds lead paint or other problems in my home?

If lead hazards are found on inspection, you or your landlord may need to have lead abatement done. Abatement is work done to remove or cover lead paint in your home. It can include replacing windows and other components containing lead. Abatement must be done by a state-licensed lead abatement contractor. For a list of licensed lead abatement contractors, visit <https://data.illinois.gov/> and use the search term “lead contractor.”

Is there any financial assistance available to fix lead hazards in my home or apartment?

Yes. The Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) has a program available that can provide financial assistance to fix lead hazards to people who meet certain income requirements. Tenants or property owners can apply. For more information, please call (312) 747-LEAD (5323).

For additional information, visit: <https://www.epa.gov/lead/learn-about-lead#lower> or <http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/>