

Understanding Lead Poisoning

What is lead poisoning?

Lead poisoning is caused by swallowing or breathing lead. Lead is poison when it gets into the body.

Lead can stay in the body for a long time. Young children absorb lead more easily than adults. The harm done by lead may never go away. Lead in the body can:

- Hurt the brain, kidneys, and nervous system
- Slow down growth and development
- Make it hard to learn
- Damage hearing and speech
- Cause behavior problems

How do children become lead poisoned?

Most of the lead poisoning in Massachusetts comes from lead paint dust in older homes. Many homes built before 1978 have lead paint on the inside and outside of the building.

When old paint peels and cracks, it creates lead paint chips and lead dust. Lead dust also comes from opening and closing old windows.

Lead dust lands on the floor. Lead gets into a child's body when he puts his hands and toys in his mouth. Children can also breathe in lead dust. Children between the ages of 9 months and 6 years are most at risk.

Important: Home repairs and renovations also create lead dust.

How will I know if my child has lead poisoning?

Most children who have lead poisoning do not look or act sick. A lead test is the only way to know if your child has lead poisoning. Ask your doctor to test your child for lead. Some children may have:

- Upset stomach
- Trouble eating or sleeping
- Headache

- Trouble paying attention

Common myths about lead poisoning

Thanks to scientific research we know a lot more about lead than we used to. However, there are still many myths about lead poisoning. Below are the most common myths that prevent children from being properly protected from lead.

Myth	Fact
Myth - Children have to eat paint chips or chew on painted surfaces in order to get lead poisoning.	Fact - Children are poisoned more often by ingesting dust from lead paint than by eating chips or chewing on painted surfaces. Lead dust covers surfaces and objects that children touch and clings to their hands and toys. Children ingest lead dust when they put their hands or toys in their mouths, which is normal behavior for all young children.
Myth - Only children with very high levels of lead in their blood are permanently impaired.	Fact - Even low levels of lead in a child's blood may have long-term effects on learning and behavior.
Myth - Only children in the inner city are in danger of getting lead poisoning.	Fact - Lead poisoning crosses all racial, geographic, and economic lines. Lead paint can be in any home built before 1978.
Myth - Only children living in poorly maintained or poorly cleaned homes are lead poisoned.	Fact - Poor maintenance and cleaning habits do increase the risk of childhood lead poisoning. However, good maintenance and cleaning habits alone will not fully protect a child. Children are most often poisoned by lead dust created over time through normal wear and tear and repairs or renovations. Lead dust cannot be fully removed by normal household cleaning. Even if cleaned, lead dust continues to be generated by activities such as opening and closing windows.
Myth - Poor parental supervision is to blame for lead poisoning.	Fact - Even well supervised children can become lead poisoned. Lead poisoning frequently occurs when children engage in the perfectly normal behavior of putting their hands, toys and other objects into their mouths.
Myth - It is more hazardous to delead than to leave lead in place. Disturbing lead paint creates dust and makes the problem worse.	Fact - Lead hazards during deleading can be controlled by a Licensed Deleader trained to use safe techniques and proper clean-up methods.
Myth - A child who appears healthy, active, and lacks symptoms is not lead poisoned.	Fact - Children who seem perfectly normal and healthy may still be lead poisoned. Damage to the brain and nervous system can be subtle and very difficult to detect without a medical exam.
Myth - Lead poisoning is not a real problem. Many people grew up in homes with lead paint and are perfectly healthy.	Fact - Since Massachusetts children were not routinely tested for lead poisoning until 1990, and since there are usually no symptoms with moderate lead poisoning, many people may have been affected without knowing it. Many people who have grown up in homes with lead paint may have experienced subtle damage to the brain and nervous system. Although these people have lived normal lives, they have been denied their full potential. A significant number of people who experienced learning, behavior, and attention problems may have been affected by undiagnosed lead poisoning.

	<p>As lead paint gets older it poses more of a health hazard because it is more likely to chip, peel, chalk and create lead dust and debris. As a result, the lead paint, which existed in homes when today's adults were young children, poses a greater threat now.</p>
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For More Information Call: The Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program (800) 532-9571

This information is provided by the Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program within the Department of Public Health.