
HEALTH COMMISSIONER CORNER



Lead Poisoning Remains a Top Preventable Illness in Children

Legislation has significantly reduced lead levels in the air and drinking water. Nonetheless, residues of this heavy metal persist in the environment. Lead is a neurotoxin and poses a serious health hazard. The fact is there is no safe level of lead in the human body. It damages the nervous system, affecting brain development and behavior, disrupting growth and learning ability. It is also toxic to many other organs, causing problems in the cardiovascular and renal systems as well.

The irony is that enormous public attention has focused on miniscule mercury levels in vaccines—while no deleterious effects have been scientifically documented. On the other hand, when it comes to actual lead contamination and exposure potential, complacency exists—despite volumes of research that have shown serious neurotoxicity, even at barely elevated levels.

Exposure is entirely preventable and its reduction is a top priority for the Putnam County Department of Health. A 1978 ban eliminated lead from residential paint, but home renovations often disturb old paint. In-home water pipes that contain lead or lead solder also may result in contamination. The most common routes of exposure are through ingestion and inhalation of lead dust. For children, particularly those under the age of six, the dangers are greatest because their brains are developing and they tend to play on the floor and put things in their mouth. Developing fetuses, like children, are also among those most sensitive. For adults, exposure typically occurs through an occupational or a hobby-related hazard.

Public health law requires all children to have their blood lead level (BLL) measured at age one and again at age two. Physicians are mandated to continue their surveillance annually through six years of age, at minimum. Recently, the

BLL for children triggering both medical and environmental intervention was reduced to reflect growing awareness of the neurological and cognitive impairment that results from even low-level exposure.

When an elevated BLL is detected in a child, the multidisciplinary approach of the Health Department is initiated. Together nursing and environmental staff members determine the source of the lead, and nursing assesses the child's nutritional status, while also checking for any developmental delays. Once the lead source is discovered, the environmental division also advises how to remediate the lead in the environment to avoid continued contamination.

Lead exposure, especially in the young, is a serious matter. Make certain all children receive the appropriate, mandated testing. The Putnam County Department of Health is prepared to assist in getting this screening done. Our mission is to improve and protect the health of Putnam County residents through prevention of illness and injury.

—*Allen Beals, MD*

Commissioner of Health

Putnam County Department of Health