

THE DANGERS OF LEAD PAINT

Many houses built before 1978 have paint that contains lead (called lead-based paint). Lead from paint, chips, and dust can pose serious health hazards, if not taken care of properly. In 1996 federal law requires that individuals receive certain information before renting, buying, or renovating pre-1978 housing. Sellers have to disclose known information on lead-based paint hazards before selling a house. Sales contracts will include a federal form about lead-based paint in the building. Buyers will have up to 10 days to check for lead hazards. Renovators will have to give you the information in this article before starting work.

WHERE LEAD-BASED PAINT IS FOUND

In general, the older your home, the more likely it has lead-based paint. Many homes built before 1978 have lead based paint. In 1978, the federal government banned lead-based paint from housing. Lead can be found in single family homes and apartments, inside and outside the house, in soil around a home. (Soil can pick up lead from exterior paint, or other sources such as past use of leaded gas in cars.)

Lead is most likely to be a hazard in paint chips, which you can see, and lead dust, which you cannot always see. Lead-based paint that is in good condition is usually not a hazard. Peeling, chipping, chalking, or cracking lead-based paint is a hazard and needs immediate attention. Lead-based paint may also be a hazard when found on surfaces that children can chew or that gets a lot of wear and tear, These areas include: windows and window sills, doors and door frames, stairs, railings and banisters, and porches and fences.

Lead dust can form when lead-based paint is dry scraped, dry sanded, or heated. Dust also forms when painted surfaces bump or rub together. Lead chips and dust can get on surfaces and objects that people touch. Settled lead dust can reenter the air when people vacuum, sweep, or walk through it. Lead in soil can be a hazard when children play in bare soil or when people bring soil into the house on their shoes.

CHECKING YOUR HOME FOR LEAD HAZARDS

Just knowing a home has lead-based paint may not tell you if there is a hazard. You can get your home checked for lead hazards in two ways, or both:

- a paint inspection tells you the lead content of every painted surface in your home

- a risk assessment tells you if there are any sources of serious lead exposure (such as peeling paint and lead dust). It also tells you what actions to take to address these hazards.

Have qualified professionals do the work. Trained professionals use a range of methods when checking your home, including visual inspection of paint condition and location, lab tests of paint samples, surface dust tests, and a portable x-ray fluorescence machine. Home test kits for lead are available, but should not be the only method used before doing renovations or to assure safety.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO PROTECT YOUR FAMILY

If you suspect that your house has lead hazard, you can take some immediate steps to reduce your family's risk. Clean up paint chips immediately. Clean floors, window frames, window sills, and other surfaces weekly. Use a mop or sponge with warm water and a general purpose cleaner or a cleaner made specifically for lead. Thoroughly rinse sponges and mop heads after cleaning dirty or dusty areas. Wash children's hands often, especially before they eat and before nap time and bed time. Keep children from chewing window sills and other painted surfaces. Clean or remove shoes before entering your home to avoid tracking in lead from soil. Make sure children eat nutritious, low fat meals high in iron and calcium, such as spinach and low-fat dairy product. Children with good diets absorb less lead.

Removing lead improperly can increase the hazard to your family by spreading even more lead dust around the house. Always use a professional who is trained to remove lead hazards safely. In addition to day to day cleaning and good nutrition you can temporarily reduce lead hazards by taking actions like repairing damaged painted surfaces and planting grass to cover soil with high lead levels. These actions (called "interim controls") are not permanent solutions and will not eliminate all risks of exposure. To permanently remove lead hazards, you must hire a lead "abatement" contractor. Abatement (or permanent hazard elimination) methods include removing, sealing, or enclosing lead-based paint with special materials. Just painting over the hazard with regular paint is not enough. Always hire a person with special training for correcting lead problems, someone who knows how to do this work safely and has the proper equipment to clean up thoroughly. If possible, hire a certified leads abatement contractor. Certified contractors will employ qualified workers and follow safety rules set by the state or the federal government.

REMODELING A HOME WITH LEAD-BASED PAINT

If not conducted properly, certain types of renovations can release lead from paint and dust into the air. Take precautions before you begin remodeling or renovations that disturb painted surfaces (such as scraping off paint or tearing out walls). These include:

- Have the area tested for lead-based paint.
- Do not use a dry scraper, belt sander, propane torch, or heat gun to remove lead-based paint. These actions create large amounts of lead dust and fumes. Lead dust can remain in your home long after the work is done.
- Temporarily move your family (especially children and pregnant women) out of your house until the work is done and the area is properly cleaned. If you can't move your family, at least completely seal off the work area.

