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Do We Still Need to be Concerned about Lead Poisoning?

Lead poisoning among young children has decreased sharply in recent decades. That's the good news. However, elimination of this health concern may still be years away because hazards remain, mainly from lead-based paint exposure in old houses. Right here in Iowa, nearly 4 of every 10 homes in Iowa were built before 1950, when lead-based paint was routinely used. Lead-based paint was used nationwide in more than 38 million homes until it was banned for residential use in 1978. The most common source of lead poisoning comes from old lead-based paint that flakes off in older homes, often times in the window sill. But children also may come into contact with lead through certain home remedies, glazed pottery, some foreign toys or candies, and even dirt around the outside of the home from chipping paint.

In 2008 (most current data), there were 624 cases of lead poisoning in Iowa children. Unfortunately, only 32.3% of children had been tested that year. The Iowa Department of Public Health recommends all children be tested for lead at 12 months and again at 18 - 24 months of age, depending on level of risk. Children of this age are at greater risk because they crawl on the floor and put fingers, toys and pacifiers in their mouths. The state of Iowa has recognized the importance of testing children and as of 2007, law requires that all children have proof of at least one blood lead test before starting kindergarten. Blood tests for lead can be done while at the doctor's office for a check-up, at WIC Clinics, or at most local public health agencies.

The effects from lead poisoning may go unnoticed at first and occur with no distinctive symptoms. However, high levels of lead circulating in a child's bloodstream can cause reduced IQ, learning disabilities, development delays and behavioral problems.

The good news is that lead poisoning is entirely preventable. In addition to a routine blood test, it is recommended that families with young children inspect their homes for signs of lead based paint, including chipping or peeling paint, often times in window sills or within walls being disrupted due to remodeling. The Bureau of Lead Poisoning Prevention at the Iowa Department of Public Health offers good information including photos of lead based paint. Their website is: <http://www.idph.state.ia.us>

Locally, the Lakes Area Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program serves the counties of Clay, Emmet and Palo Alto. The Program is committed to decreasing childhood lead poisoning in our area. For more information about preventing, treating or identifying lead poisoning, call Clay County Public Health / Spencer Hospital at 712-264-6468, Clay County Environmental Health at 712-262-8165 or the Iowa Department of Public Health at 1-800-972-2026.