

Bright Futures Begin Lead-Free: Protect Your Child from Lead Exposure

Lead is a toxic metal that has been used in many types of products for hundreds of years. Children and adults can get lead in their bodies if they are exposed to lead in their environment. Young children are particularly vulnerable to lead exposure, due to their rapid growth and development.

Lead exposure can impact children's brain development, and can result in behavioral changes such as reduced attention span, increased antisocial behavior, and a higher likelihood of poorer school performance with lower reading and math testing scores. Many of these neurological and behavioral effects of lead are believed to be irreversible.

A child with high blood lead levels may have headaches, restlessness, anemia, weight loss, hearing loss, learning disabilities or other symptoms. Lead may affect the development and functioning of almost all body organs.

So...where are children exposed to lead? The paint in a home can be a source of lead poisoning because lead-based paint was used in homes until it was banned in 1978. Older homes are more likely to contain lead-based paint.

Children living in older homes, especially those built before 1950, are at higher risk for lead exposure. Approximately 3.3 million American households with children younger than 6 years old have lead exposure hazards from lead paint, dust, or soil.

Lead can build up in bodies by breathing dust into the lungs or by ingestion through the mouth. Renovation, repairs, or painting in these older homes can increase the risk of exposure. Lead can also be found in drinking water due to leaching from lead pipes, faucets, and fixtures.

Children and adults might not have signs or symptoms of lead poisoning, so it is important to get tested. If you think your child is at risk or if you are concerned about lead in your home, ask your child's doctor or the health department about blood lead testing. A blood lead test is the best way to know if a child is exposed to lead.

Who should be tested? There are requirements for children participating in the Women, Infant & Children (WIC) and Medicaid programs to be tested. However, parents in ALL of our South Heartland communities, whether or not they are utilizing the WIC and Medicaid programs, should determine whether their child might be at risk of exposure to lead.

Did you know...? In the South Heartland Health District, 25-35% of homes in Adams and Clay counties and 35-45% of homes in Nuckolls and Webster counties have elevated lead risk due to the age of the housing. The Nebraska Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS) recommends that children living in certain zip code areas be tested for lead poisoning at age 12 months and again at 24 months. The South Heartland communities of Hastings (68901), Bladen (68928), Campbell (68932), Clay Center

(68933), Fairfield (68938), Hardy (68948), Holstein (68950), Kenesaw (68956), Lawrence (68957), Red Cloud (68970), Superior (68978), and Trumbull (68980) are included in this list of areas where children are more likely to come in contact with lead in their environment.

Parents and guardians might also use a short questionnaire about lead exposure developed by Nebraska DHHS to determine the likelihood of lead exposure to their child:

- 1) Does the child live in or often visit a home built before 1950?
- 2) Does the child live in or often visit a home built before 1978 that has been remodeled or renovated within the last year?
- 3) Does the child have a sibling or playmate with lead poisoning or an elevated blood lead level?
- 4) Does the child live with an adult whose job or hobby involves exposure to lead? (Examples include: metal manufacturing, welding, battery recycling, building repair, renovation, and painting, ammunition production, firing ranges, casting bullets, and making stained glass, pottery and glazing.)
- 5) Does the child's family use products from other countries that may contain lead? (Examples include: traditional medicines, cosmetics and powders, imported spices, glazed pottery, and imported cookware.)
- 6) Is your child a refugee, migrant, immigrant, foreign adoptee, or in foster care?

If the answer to any of these exposure questions is “yes” or “don’t know”, the child may need a blood lead test. Parents and caregivers should ask their child’s healthcare provider about blood lead testing.

Want to know more about lead and how to protect your children? On October 17, South Heartland District Health Department is hosting a lead awareness and education event for community members to learn more about lead and how to protect our youngest and most at-risk residents. The program will be presented by staff with Region 7 of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (E.P.A.) from 12:00 – 1:30 pm in Room B at the Hastings Public Library. Bring your lunch and join us. Contact the South Heartland District Health Department for more information.

Michele Bever is the executive director for South Heartland District Health Department, serving Adams, Clay, Nuckolls and Webster counties in south central Nebraska. She may be reached at 1-877-238-7595.