

QUESTIONS PARENTS ASK ABOUT LEAD POISONING

BACKGROUND

Q: I heard that most children have less lead in their blood now than 20 years ago. If this is so, why is childhood lead poisoning in the news now?

A: The average blood-lead level of U.S. children has come down during the last 20 years, largely because of the reduction of lead levels in gasoline and food. **But as blood-lead levels have come down, concern about the effects of low lead levels in children has risen.**

Q: Why has concern risen about low lead levels in children?

A: There is new evidence that lead is harmful at blood levels once thought safe. Studies show that groups of children with higher lead levels are likely to have lower IQ scores, slower development, and more attention problems than similar children with lower lead levels. These effects are subtle and have been observed in large groups of children with lead levels at least as low as 10 micrograms per deciliter. (Micrograms per deciliter, written as $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$, indicates the amount of lead in a deciliter of blood.)

BLOOD TESTS

Q: Should I have my child's blood tested for lead?

A: The only way to know for sure if your children have elevated blood-lead levels is to have them tested. The Centers for Disease Control recommend testing almost all children at 12 months of age, and, if resources allow, at 24 months. Screening should start at 6 months if the child is at risk of lead exposure (for example, if the child lives in an older home built before 1960 which has peeling or chipping paint). Decisions about further testing should be based on previous blood-lead test results and the child's risk of lead exposure. In some states, more frequent lead screening is required by law.

Q: Why should I have my child screened for lead?

A: Virtually all children in the United States are at risk for lead poisoning. As a result of industrialization, lead is widespread in the environment. Lead is harmful to the developing brain and nervous system of fetuses and young children. Children are more likely than adults to be exposed to lead because they have more hand-to-mouth activity than adults and because they absorb more lead than adults. Large numbers of U.S. children continue to have blood-lead levels in the toxic range. It is important for you to know if your child is one of them.

Q: My child's blood-lead level is between 15 and 19 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$. The doctor tells me to bring her back in a few months for another test. Isn't there anything else I could be doing?

A: Your child's test showed that she had more lead in her blood than the average child in the United States. If your child's level stays in this range for several months or goes up, you should have your home inspected in order to find any sources of lead.

Q: The doctor says my child's lead level is between 10 and 14 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$. What does this mean? Has my child been damaged?

A: Studies of the effects of lead on large groups of young children show that lead can be harmful at these blood levels. It is important to remember, however, that these effects are seen in studies of large groups of children and do not mean that every child will have the same problems. To help your child grow up healthy and smart, make sure she or he receives the proper foods, adequate shelter, and plenty of love.

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