

Beware lead-based products in older homes

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Recently, while talking to construction workers about the dangers of lead contamination on the jobsite, I was reminded that people who live in older homes have the potential for lead problems when they work on their homes. Lead once was regularly used in construction and public utility work.

Like so many other building materials once thought ideal for construction, lead has wonderful properties that make it a good binding substance for such things as pipe work, waterproofing, and paint. But the federal government has created many regulations, monitoring oversights and recommendations concerning lead, because absorbing it into the body can result in many serious health problems.

In 1974, Congress passed the Safe Drinking Water Act, which requires the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to determine safe levels of chemicals in drinking water, which do or may cause health problems. These non-enforceable levels, based solely on possible health risks and exposure, are called Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL) goals.

Lead is prohibited for use in water supply systems. The so called "Action Level" for lead has been set at 15 parts per billion (ppb) and comes from national standards called National Primary Drinking Water Regulations. All public water supplies must abide by these regulations.

LEAD-BASED PAINT

Homes built before the early 1970s may contain lead products, but there may well be lead in homes built later, because not all lead-based products were disposed of at the time. In fact, I'm told many painters "swore by their lead-based paint."

Lead-based paint most often is found around windows, in kitchens and in bathrooms. Renovation projects taking place in lead-painted areas can create harmful lead dust. If you think your home contains lead-based paint, hire a professional to test for and remove it. During renovation and remediation work make sure there is an airlock at the entry to the work area.

The airlock consists of two sheets of thick plastic. One is completely taped along all four edges, with the tape extending all the way around the top, two sides, and the floor. This sheet is then cut down the middle. The second sheet is only taped along the top and acts as a flap covering the slit in the first sheet of plastic. If two entryways exist, one should be completely sealed in plastic.

REMOVE FURNISHINGS

As an alternative, the doorway can be taped closed on all sides. Remove all furniture, area rugs, curtains, food, clothing, and other household items from the area until cleanup is complete. Items that cannot be removed from the work area should be tightly wrapped with plastic sheeting and sealed with duct tape until all work and cleanup is complete.

Turn off forced-air heating and air conditioning systems when remodeling, renovating, or performing interim controls. Then cover the heating and air conditioning vents with plastic sheeting and tape them in place with duct tape. Windows should be kept closed unless volatile chemicals will be used.

It is rare to find adults exposed to lead at significantly high enough levels to cause illness, but it does occur. Children, however, are relatively more susceptible to the harmful effects of lead because lead contamination hampers the development of the central nervous system and children, of course, have less developed systems.

The younger the child, including developing fetuses, the more potential for harm. Research demonstrates that, poor nutrition increases the susceptibility of lead's harm due to increased absorption of lead through ingestion in children who do not eat well.

SHORT TERM EFFECTS

In adults, the short term effects of lead can cause interference with red blood cell chemistry, while the long-term effects of exposure at levels above the maximum contamination levels are stroke, kidney disease and cancer.

Anyone planning to work on a home he or she suspects may contain lead-based paints or other lead-containing products, keep all children, pregnant women, and pets away from the work area, as well as taking protective measures yourself. If you live in an older home and suspect you may have a lead problem call 1 800-424-LEAD. Don't take chances: Your health and the health of your family hangs in the balance.

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