



LEAD FACT SHEET

What is lead?

Lead is a naturally occurring bluish-gray metal found in small amounts in the earth's crust. It has no special taste or smell, and can be found in all parts of our environment. Most of it comes from mining, manufacturing, and the burning of fossil fuels. Among lead's many uses have been in batteries, metal products such as solder and pipes, and roofing materials.

How dangerous is lead?

In 1991, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services called lead the "number one environmental threat to the health of children in the U.S." Lead affects practically all systems within the body. Exposure to lower levels of lead can adversely affect the brain, central nervous system, blood cells, and the kidneys. At high levels, it can cause convulsions, coma, and even death. Most severe are the effects of lead exposure on fetuses and young children. These include delays in physical and mental development, lower IQ levels, shortened attention spans, and increased behavioral problems. Fetuses, infants, and children are more vulnerable to lead exposure than adults since lead is more easily absorbed into growing bodies, and the tissues of small children are more sensitive to the damaging effects of lead.

What are the most common ways of being exposed to lead?

There are many ways that people are exposed to lead: through air, drinking water, food, contaminated soil, deteriorating paint, and dust. Airborne lead enters the body when an individual breathes or swallows lead particles or dust once it has settled. Old lead-based paint is the most significant source of lead exposure in the U.S. today. Harmful exposures to lead can occur when lead-based paint is improperly removed from surfaces by dry scraping, sanding, or open flame burning. High concentrations of airborne lead particles in homes can come from lead dust from outdoor sources, including contaminated soil tracked inside, and from the use of lead in certain indoor activities such as soldering and stained-glass making.