

Lead in house paint

Health risks of lead

Lead is toxic to humans, even in small amounts, and can be absorbed from ingesting contaminated products or from breathing air containing lead dust. Pregnant women and children with developing bodies are especially vulnerable because smaller, growing bodies are more susceptible to absorbing and retaining lead. Exposure to lead can have a wide range of effects on a child's development and behaviour even when exposed to small amounts of lead levels. Lead exposure during infancy or childhood may result in anaemia/neurological impairment, renal alterations, colic and impaired metabolism of vitamin D.

The effects of lead exposure can be irreversible making it important to prevent the exposure before it occurs. Further information on health risks from exposure to lead can be obtained from <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/your-health/lead-exposure-and-health-effects>

Dangers of lead in paint

The most common source of lead in a domestic setting is lead-based paint. High lead content paints were commonly used prior to 1965 and since then, the percentage of lead in paint has dropped from as high as 50 per cent to less than 0.1 per cent. However, in homes built 40 years ago or more, some paint layers may still contain high levels of lead.

Lead in paint is a problem only if it is damaged or disturbed. Paint that is not peeling, flaking or that is covered by a coat of lead-free paint (in good condition) does not present a risk. Nevertheless, lead paint can be hazardous if it is in areas where it can be easily damaged or chipped, or where it is accessible to young children who may chew on it, lick it or eat paint flakes. It is most likely to be found on surfaces where enamel paints are generally used, including:

- window frames
- doors
- skirting boards
- exterior walls
- gutters
- metal surfaces
- fascias

It can also be found on interior walls, ceilings and areas where enamel paint is used. Pink and red primer both contain lead, so care should be taken if any surface which has had any of these paints applied is disturbed.

Working safely with lead paint

When renovating or working with lead paint, care must be taken to avoid exposing yourself or others. If not handled properly, dust and paint chips containing lead can remain in the home or garden years after the work is completed. Owners should be aware that soils in older residences may be contaminated from previous home renovations.

The removal of lead paint by blasting, burning, dry scraping or sanding, or the use of power tools can cause potential harm to yourself and others. Small paint particles can be inhaled or deposited in furnishings or carpet, making complete removal extremely difficult. If possible, consideration should be given to paint over the existing painted surface with lead-free paint products rather than removal of lead paint.

The booklet, LEAD ALERT - Six step guide to painting your home contains comprehensive advice on determining the best approach when dealing with lead-based paint. The booklet can be accessed electronically on the internet at:
www.environment.gov.au/atmosphere/airquality/publications/leadpaint.html.

Lead paint test kits

Test kits can be used to establish whether lead paint is present. These are readily available in retail outlets and online. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) has assessed test kits for reliability and accuracy. Information on USEPA approved test kits can be found at www.epa.gov/lead/testkit.html. Please note that test results will not indicate the concentration of lead in the paint sample. However, the recommended precautions are the same regardless of the lead level.

Test kits may give false results. Therefore, if your home was built prior to 1970, you should consider having a laboratory test undertaken to confirm the result or undertake work using lead safe practices. Laboratories accredited for lead testing of paint can be found on the National Association of Testing Authorities Australia website at www.nata.asn.au/facilities-and-labs.

Concerned about possible exposure to lead

To find out if you or a family member has been exposed to lead, visit your doctor and request a blood test.

Elevated blood lead and legislation

In Queensland, if a person has an elevated level of lead in their blood (indicated by a blood test), the Department of Health must be notified. Notifications that are not workplace related will be investigated to identify exposure sources and assist with management strategies.

For more information

Call 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) or contact your nearest Hospital and Health Service Public Health Unit (PHU) during business hours Monday to Friday. PHU contact details are located at www.health.qld.gov.au/cho.