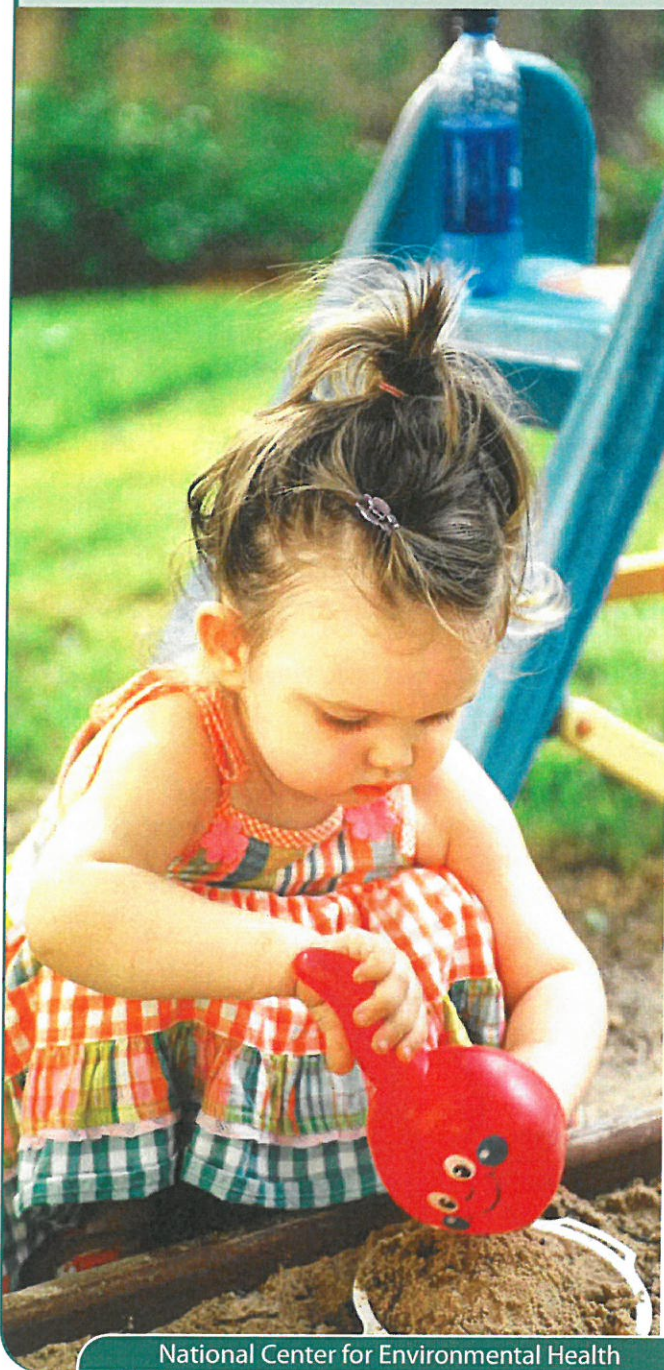


Childhood Lead Poisoning

What Is the Problem?

Approximately 500,000 U.S. children aged 1–5 years have blood lead levels above 5 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood, the reference level at which the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends public health actions be initiated.

Lead poisoning can affect nearly every system in the body. Because lead poisoning often occurs with no obvious symptoms, it frequently goes unrecognized. Lead poisoning can cause learning disabilities, behavioral problems, and, at very high levels, seizures, coma, and even death. No safe blood lead level has been identified.



How Are Children Exposed to Lead?

The major sources of lead exposure among U.S. children are lead-based paint and lead-contaminated dust found in deteriorating buildings. Lead-based paints were banned for use in housing in 1978. However, approximately 24 million housing units in the United States have deteriorated leaded paint and elevated levels of lead-contaminated house dust. More than 4 million of these dwellings are homes to one or more young children.

Other sources of lead poisoning are related to

- home health remedies (azarcon and greta, which are used for upset stomach or indigestion; pay-loo-ah, which is used for rash or fever);
- some imported candies (particularly those from Mexico);
- imported toy jewelry and toys;
- drinking water (lead pipes, solder, brass fixtures, valves can all leach lead);
- work (recycling or making automobile batteries and home remodeling);
- hobbies (making stained-glass windows, making pottery, and painting); and
- soil contaminated by lead paint chips, dust, or particles.

Who Is at Risk?

- Children under the age of 6 years because they are growing so rapidly and because they tend to put their hands or other objects into their mouths.
- Children from all social and economic levels can be affected by lead poisoning, although children living at or below the poverty line who live in older housing are at greatest risk.
- Children of some racial and ethnic groups and those living in older housing are disproportionately affected by lead.

National Center for Environmental Health
Division of Emergency and Environmental Health Services

