

Medic tells swift death from lead

By Lynn Langway
Of Our Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — A Tulane University scientist says animal experiments indicate a toddler with a runny nose "could well die" suddenly of shock after swallowing a mere, small dose of lead paint.

Dr. Nicholas Di Lorio, chairman of the Department of Physiology at Tulane Medical School, said the experiments indicate a low-level dose of lead can "wipe out" the body's resistance to certain bacteria and viruses, triggering "massive liver damage" and lethal shock.

"When a small child has a very mild infection, and ingests a very small quantity of lead, we would anticipate dramatically increased severity of disease and more cardiovascular consequences," said Di Lorio, who told a Senate subcommittee Friday at Tulane's last research under an American Heart Ass. grant.

THE PROFESSOR said experiments on rats and monkeys confirmed the body's resistance to the toxic compounds formed by some species of bacteria, including those present in salmonella poisoning, diarrhea and other low-grade infections frequently found in children and infants.

Di Lorio said the experiments demonstrated that as little as one milligram of lead could destroy a rat's defense cells and multiply the lethal effects of endotoxins by 100,000.

Di Lorio said in an interview that this multiplication effect "could transform even a runny nose or diarrhea into a lethal shock" in an infant or small child.

He said the Tulane research team plans to investigate "the possibility that so-called sudden infant death syndrome could be related" to this effect of lead on endotoxins. "We do know that newborns are very susceptible to both lead and endotoxins," he said.

Sudden infant death, or "crib death," is the major killer of children between 1 month and 1 year old, striking babies — he says — at the heart.

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