

Our blood's 37% freer of lead

By Joseph Carey
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The amount of poisonous lead in people's blood fell an average 37 percent in the late 1970s, researchers say in today's *New England Journal of Medicine*.

"The most reasonable explanation (is) reduction of lead used in gasoline production over the same period," says Joseph L. Annett of the National Center for Health Statistics, co-author of the report.

Between 1970 and 1979 there was a 41 percent drop in lead in the air, says the Environmental Protection Agency. At the same time, there was a 40 percent reduction of lead burned in gasoline.

High levels of lead in the body are associated with learning problems and low intelligence — and some researchers fear lesser amounts also may be dangerous.

The study sampled the blood of 27,801 persons. Lead levels fell the most — 42 percent — among white children age 5 and younger. The decline of 31 percent among blacks of all ages was the smallest decline.

"We thought it might drop by about 10 percent, but not this much," says Annett. Researchers first thought the findings were a laboratory error.