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Lead poisoning: Children are the victims

By TEDDI GIBSON

Nauseated, cranky and maybe feverish. . . .

In a toddler, you might think these are flu symptoms and put the child to bed with an aspirin.

But they could also be symptoms of something much more serious — lead poisoning. Untreated, lead poisoning can result ultimately in mental retardation and death.

"I hate to be an alarmist. Everytime your child has a stomach ache, it doesn't mean he has lead poisoning. It takes a long time to build up," explained Dr. Jack Will, Cleveland's chief of community hygiene.

"But the symptoms are very nonspecific. They are so general they could be identical to other child illnesses," he said Dr. Will is director of the city's first Childhood Lead Poisoning Control Program.

He said the greatest problem in lead poisoning is in children, aged one to six years who live in old inner city homes.

Such homes, 30 or more years old, may have walls finished in lead paint. If the paint peels, youngsters may sample the chips and even develop a craving for them.

(The paint industry says no paint with lead pigment has been made since World War II, and is making available films and pamphlets on lead poisoning.)

"A number of pediatricians have written articles about why children eat non-food items. They think lead paint chips have a sweet taste. Children at that stage are learning about their environment through sight, smell and taste. If they hit on something that tastes sweet, they may come back to it."

"For instance, in Chicago they found a five-year-old punched through wallboard, used to cover the old lead paint, to get at the paint chips.

"Here in Cleveland, we found a preschooler who liked to carry around a brown paper bag with paint chips. He was pretending he was carrying his lunch to school and getting the paint chips from the outside of the house. He was eating them like candy."

Dr. Will pointed out that everyone has some trace of lead in their blood.

The problem is elevated levels of lead in the blood. According to the U. S. Surgeon General's guidelines, a reading of 40 micrograms and over indicates an abnormality.





Dr. Jack Will, director of the city's new Childhood Lead Poisoning Control program.

PIN PRICK is used to draw blood samples from youngsters at health center. Here William Morrison, field worker, begins testing for lead levels in two-year old Demarris Jackson's blood.

(Press photo by Herman Seidl)

Those guidelines are being used at the Lead Poisoning Control Center which opened last week at the McCafferty Health Center, 4242 Lorain Ave. Since Jan. 11, 377 children have been tested here.

"It's hard to say when high lead levels become significant. The doctor has to evaluate the child individually at a particular time."

Experts are not sure how many children are affected.

"It's been estimated that 10% of all children have high lead levels, so potentially there could be 40,000 to 80,000 in the city who are effected," said Boyd Marsh, deputy commissioner for health for environmental health services.

"That's part of the reason for the program; so we can find the extent of the problem and assess it better."

The lead poisoning prevention center is supported by $200,000, granted last June by the federal government for equipment and staff salaries, and matched by $80,000 in local services.

"Under Federal guidelines, about 70% of the funds are to be used in testing and screening children and 30% in treatment," said Marsh.

He said the program begins with routine testing of children, ages up to six years, who pass through health center facilities. Two more testing centers are to be opened at the end of this month at the Hough Norwood Health Center and the J. Glen Smith Health Center.

The children are tested with a finger prick blood test. Those with high lead levels are referred to their doctors or centers. Simultaneously, the program provides for field workers to check the home for lead sources and for other children who may be affected. Equipment includes an atomic absorption device for analyzing lead levels and a device which measures lead on homes' walls.

Children with high lead levels can be treated as outpatients or hospitalized.

"Lead poison is accumulative," said Dr. Will. "It accumulates in soft tissues, causing kidney malfunctions and damaging the nervous system."

He explained it can be treated with chelating agents — drugs which mobilize lead in the body and remove it through the urinary system. Treatment continues until the lead level, tested in blood and urine samples, stabilizes.

Marsh is also planning a housing effort to help homeowners to eliminate the source, and is working with the housing department for legal enforcement.

"Our next hurdle is legal enforcement. It may be a problem in large, multi family dwellings.

"I would hate to see us sending children back to the source of the problem."

Marsh said they anticipate the program will run three to five years.

So far area residents have been cooperative, said Lillian Craig, a field worker and Near West Side resident.

"We're excited because we've been studied to death and at last something is being done."