

SOME QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT LEAD-BASED PAINT

How do I know that the paint I buy today is lead-free?

The Lead-Based Paint Poisoning Prevention Act, passed by Congress in 1977, banned the use of lead in household paints.

Does that mean that any paint manufactured before 1977 poses a lead hazard?

No. Companies began to phase out the manufacture of lead-based paint as early as the 1930s and 1940s. ("Lead-based paint" refers to the very old products in which white lead was used as a pigment and made up a high percentage of the product's contents.)

By the 1950s, only very small amounts of lead, as low as half a percent, were used in some paints to speed up drying. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development does not believe that those small amounts represent a health hazard.

How can I tell if my house is safe?

First, how old is it? If it was built before 1960, it may contain lead-based paint.

Second, has your older home been well maintained? Have walls and woodwork been washed regularly, and the furniture and carpets vacuumed frequently? Is the paint surface in good condition, and has the interior been repainted at least twice since the house was new?

If so, there is less chance of conditions that could result in a hazardous exposure to lead.

But if your older property has been poorly maintained, if the paint appears in poor condition, or if you are planning renovations that will disturb the paint surface, you should have walls, woodwork and trim tested for the presence of lead-based paint.

How do I have my home tested?

There are several testing methods. Each has its advantages and disadvantages from the standpoints of cost and reliability. Contact your local health department for more information.

Suppose I find out that my home does contain lead-based paint. How can I tell if my children are at risk?

The quickest way is to have your child's blood lead level tested at your clinic or pediatrician's office. If the level is normal, there's no immediate cause for alarm. A slightly elevated level means that you should find the source of the lead that is getting into the child's blood.

That would mean testing your home for lead-based paint. It would also mean looking for other sources of lead in the child's environment. For example, does the child play in dirt near a heavily-traveled street or road? If so, the lead source may be gasoline additives that have settled into the soil. Lead plumbing pipe can release lead into drinking water. Some foreign-made toys may also be covered with lead-based paint.

Suppose the source is paint in the house? What do I do?

If the paint is in poor condition -- chipping, peeling or worn -- or if high levels of lead dust are present, the situation calls for immediate action.

First, children should be removed from the lead-contaminated environment.

If you rent, your landlord or local housing authority should be contacted right away. If you own the property, you will need to take immediate steps to remedy the situation.

Complete lead-paint removal is not a project for the do-it-yourselfer! Trained professionals know how to do the job safely, and to make sure no lead-containing dust or debris is left behind. Experts recommend that the property owner contact the local office of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for guidance.

DON'T sand the old paint; that will add to the lead dust.

DON'T try to burn the paint off with a torch or heat gun which can vaporize the lead, which can then be inhaled.

But what if the paint is in good condition and has been well maintained?

For paint in good condition, expert opinions vary about how much action is necessary to make a house safe for children, but there are some things you can do right away.

Thoroughly wash walls and woodwork to remove dust. Thoroughly clean furniture, draperies and carpets. Pay close attention to the child's personal hygiene; make sure hands are washed frequently, and supervise what goes into the child's mouth.

Beyond those immediate actions -- again, expert opinions vary widely. But with paint in good condition, there are other things you can do quickly and at relatively low cost.

Follow up the wall and woodwork cleaning with the application of two coats of quality paint. If there is concern about toddlers picking at or chewing on woodwork or window-sills, consider having those items removed and replaced.

What is the paint industry's position on this issue?

The industry recognizes that childhood lead poisoning paint is a serious public health issue. We also recognize that a total professional lead paint removal project represents a tremendous - often impossible -- expenditure for many property owners, and in some cases, may not be necessary or advisable.

The paint industry will contribute our technical and product knowledge to helping solve the problems wherever and however possible.

We plan to offer help in two specific ways:

-First, to provide information to families about avoiding exposure to lead, whatever the source.

-Second, to work with health professionals, public agencies, and experts in the construction and renovation fields to develop a low-cost means of protecting children from the hazard of lead-based paint in older buildings.

Dealing with lead hazards does not always involve extreme danger or exorbitant costs. Heavy concentrations of lead in badly maintained buildings must be dealt with immediately and with extreme caution, for the safety of both occupants and workers. But less urgent problems can be dealt with during the course of planned renovations or improvements. Meanwhile, the situation may be controllable through good cleaning and maintenance practices.

Situations vary, and so should responses. People should be concerned -- but they should not allow themselves to be stampeded into panic.