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Lead Peril in Streets?

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Washington area youngsters who play along busy streets may face the same potential hazard from lead poisoning as those who live in homes painted with metal-based paint, a scientist has warned.

Recent tests by the Center for Science in the Public Interest have shown that dust along many city and suburban streets here contain heavy concentrations of lead, according to Dr. Albert J. Fritsch, director of the nonprofit research group.

Children who eat dirt or who put things in their mouths after dropping them in the dirt could be ingesting dangerous amounts of lead, he said, especially if they play in congested areas.

The tests were done by the center in preparation for testimony before the federal Environmental Protection Agency which is considering regulations requiring the elimination of lead from gasoline. Most, although not all, of the lead in the streets is from car exhausts, Fritsch said.

BRAIN DAMAGE to inner-city children resulting from eating lead-based paint has been a concern of health officials for some time.

The substantial amounts of lead in dust along streets not only increases the danger of lead poisoning to District children but helps to spread it to the suburbs, Fritsch said.

Readings in Northern Virginia and Montgomery County showed substantial lead levels but not as high as in parts of the District.

Dr. Bonnie J. Peacock, of D.C.'s Children's Hospital, reports that many children have been found in the hospital's routine screening program to have "elevated blood lead levels" but "no history of eating peeling paint and plaster."

EPA has held that 2,500 parts of lead per 1 million parts of dirt can be a significant level in terms of children's health. Fritsch contends that because lead poisoning is cumulative, any source can add to danger.

The center's tests were done on an x-ray fluorescence spectroscopy, a device originally developed to test moon rocks. The readings were taken after the heavy rains earlier this summer so they may be somewhat lower than normal, Fritsch said.