

Lead poisoning: Children are the victims

By TEDDY GILSON

Nervous, cranky and maybe foolish. In a twinkling you might think there are the symptoms and put the child to bed with an aspirin.

But they could also be symptoms of something much more serious — lead poisoning. Unnoticed, but with a result ultimately as deadly as anything and death.

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

"But the symptoms are very nonspecific. They are so general they could be identical to other child ailments," he said. Dr. Wills 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.

Each house, 30 or more years old, may have walls laced with 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 in making suitable films and pigments on lead poisoning.)

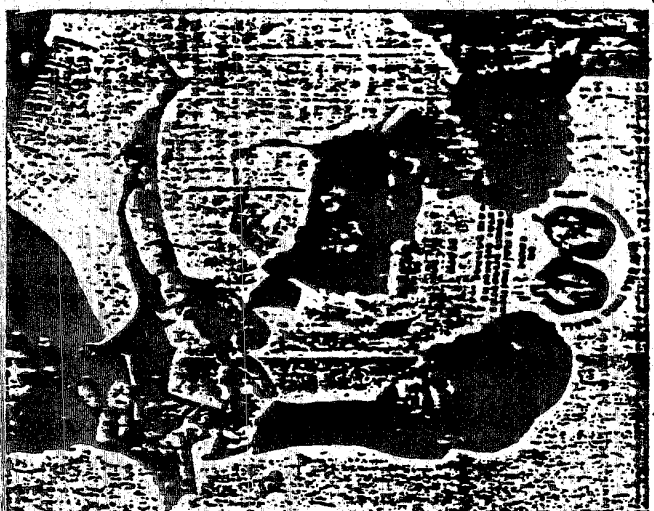
"A number of publications have written articles about why children eat and feed from. They think lead paint chips have a sweet taste. Childrens' feet also are laced about their environment through silt, sand and silt. If they lay on something that tastes sweet, they may have lead in it."

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

"There in Cleveland, a five-year-old child was found to carry around a bunch of paint chips that he was grinding to eat carrying him back to school and getting the paint chips from the outside of the house. He was getting them like candy."

Dr. Wills pointed out that everyone has more or less of lead in their blood.

The problem is elevated levels of lead in the blood. According to the U. S. Surgeon General's



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

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

(Press photo by Herman Seidl)

publications, a reading of 40 micrograms and over indicates an abnormality.

Those guidelines are being used at the Lead Poisoning Control Program, which is working at the Cleveland Health Center, 4172 Lorain St., 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 in

isolation at a particular time."

Experts are not sure how many children are affected.

"It's been estimated that 1% of all children have high lead levels, or possibly three could be as high as 50,000 in the city who are affected," said Roy Kern, expert coordinator for health in environmental health services.

"That's part of the reason for the program, we want to find the extent of the problem and assess it better."

The lead poisoning prevention center, in operation by the city, is staffed by health workers and nurses. It is located at the Cleveland Health Center, 4172 Lorain St.

Under Federal guidelines, about 70% of the bloods up to be used in testing and removing children and 10% in treatment, said Wills.

He said the program begins with testing blood of children, ages up to six years, who pass through health center facilities. The more testing centers are to be opened at the end of the year, the more children will be tested.

The children are tested with a finger prick blood test. Those with high lead levels are referred to health workers for lead testing to check the source for lead sources and for other children who may be affected. Significant findings on family members are for analyzing lead levels and a device which presence had no known source.

Children with high lead levels are to be checked as outpatients or hospitalized.

"Lead poisoning is irreversible," said Dr. Wills. "If it is not treated up to ten days after exposure, and then and during the nervous system, the explanation is even less hopeful with bleeding sprouts — drugs which involve this in the brain and nervous system. The primary system, that is, the central nervous system, is the most sensitive and the most difficult to treat."

Wills is also planning a testing effort to help homeowners to eliminate the source, lead in paint, with the housing department for lead elimination.

"Our next battle is legal enforcement. It may be a problem to force small family dwellings."

"I would have to see no testing children back to the source of the problem."

He said they anticipated the program will run three to five years.

So far the problems have been cooperative with the city, a little better and then with the state residents.

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