

# Danger in Lead Pipes and Paint

Lead has mostly been eliminated from residential paint and lead water pipes haven't been used in years, but new scientific evidence shows that people are susceptible to lead poisoning at much lower levels than previously thought harmful.

The dangers of lead, especially to children and pregnant women, have sparked a new round of concern and action that may soon rival efforts to rid buildings of asbestos.

In the U.S., federal legislation requires estate agents and sellers of any building built before 1978 to declare their knowledge of lead hazards, provide a lead warning pamphlet to prospective buyers, and give them a chance to test for lead before the contract can be finalized.

In Canada, lead was used in most paint up to about the time of World War II. Some paint contained as much as 50 percent lead by weight until 1976 when the federal government restricted lead to 0.5 percent.

Called the "silent disease" because it affects humans slowly and without symptoms, lead poisoning can cause learning disabilities, interfere with growth, cause hearing loss or visual impairment, damage the nervous system, interrupt fetal development, cause miscarriages, or lead to brain damage, convulsions and death.

As many as 90 percent of North American houses built before the fifties contain lead-based paint. This flaking paint is a threat to children inside the house and while playing on the ground near the house. Adults and children together are at risk from the dust that results from normal wear and friction around door jambs and window frames.

Everyone needs to take great care to avoid the dust that is created when surfaces are scraped or sanded for repainting, which is a job for specially-trained lead abatement contractors. You can't eliminate the dust with a regular vacuum cleaner without making the situation worse.

Paint isn't the only threat. An older home's plumbing may contain lead pipes, which were widely used and last a long time. Lead leaches into the water as it stands in the pipes. (Interestingly, the word plumbing comes from the Latin word *plumbum*, which means lead.)

Lead pipes were commonly used for toilet and sink drains because lead is so soft the pipes could be bent by hand. Lead solder was used to join older

lead pipes to modern copper pipes. And molten lead was used to seal joints in the big cast iron pipes that carry waste to the sewers.

Even people who live in a modern house without lead pipes can't assume their drinking water is lead-free, because in many cities there's lead in the water long before it reaches the house. Residents in cities with high lead levels in the water supply should purchase water-treatment devices that filter out lead before it reaches the tap.

Most home inspectors point out the existence of lead pipes whenever they are found and most will send water samples to the local health department if requested. Municipalities normally charges about \$50 for testing. Home inspectors can test for lead paint for about \$50 or test all the vinyl blinds in the house for a similar price.

Now that we know how dangerous lead can be in and around older homes, we need to make sure we act on it and protect ourselves and our families from this unseen danger.

