

American Academy of Pediatrics

Frequently Asked Questions regarding recent Consumer Product Safety Commission recalls of children's toys due to excessive levels of lead

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What kind of exposure to lead constitutes a health risk for a child?

All children are exposed to lead and have some lead in their bodies. However, no “safe level” of lead exposure has been defined. Therefore, the goal is to keep the level of exposure as low as possible.

Children most often get lead into their bodies by getting lead-contaminated dust or dirt on their hands and then putting their hands in their mouth, or by directly sucking or chewing lead-painted or lead-containing objects. Because these types of mouthing behaviors (placing hands in the mouth, sucking and chewing on objects) are a normal part of development between about the ages of 6-months to 3 years, a child's age is an important factor when considering who is at highest risk for swallowing lead.

One of the more serious concerns is the swallowing of an object that has high amounts of lead, such as jewelry that contains lead, or a small lead weight or fishing sinker. If a lead object is swallowed, seek medical attention immediately.

My child owns or plays with one of the toys recalled because of lead paint. What should I do? How do I know if I should have the child tested for lead exposure?

First of all, keep the toy away from your child and return it as instructed in the recall. If you have concerns about your child's exposure to lead, discuss the need for a blood lead test with your child's pediatrician. Children who play with lead-painted toys that have cracking, peeling, or chipping paint, or who put the toy in their mouth or bite on it are most likely to have lead exposure from the toy.

What are some of the symptoms of lead poisoning in children? What are some of the long-term effects?

Most who get lead in their body do not have any physical symptoms. Lead, even at very low levels, can make it harder for a child to learn and can cause behavior problems. These effects may be hard to identify in an individual child.

For example, a child with a blood lead level at 10 – 20 micrograms/dL may not exhibit any symptoms at all, yet the lead may change brain development to cause lower IQ scores or behavioral problems later in life.

At higher blood lead levels, generally above 40 micrograms/dL, symptoms may include abdominal pain, constipation, loss of appetite, agitation, lethargy, and even seizures.

What is involved in testing for lead? What is the test like?

The level of lead in the body is measured in a small blood sample. The test is relatively quick and easy.

The blood sample will be collected either by a venous draw (a needle inserted into a vein) or by fingerstick (a small prick on tip of a finger). A venous sample is generally preferable, as it provides more accurate results.

In most cases, the blood sample will be sent to a lab and results returned within a couple of days. A few facilities can analyze samples on-site and provide immediate feedback.

Lead evaluations derived from analysis of hair, teeth, or fingernail samples are not recommended.

Who is responsible for ensuring that toys sold in the US have safe levels of lead?

The US Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) is responsible for the safety of toys sold in the US. It is important to note, however, that very few toys are tested by the agency before they reach the marketplace. The CPSC's work consists largely of recalling toys after they have been discovered to be unsafe.

Is there an accepted level of lead content for toys sold in the US? If so, what levels are permitted? Are the regulations different for toys manufactured inside vs. outside of the US?

There is no single standard for lead content in all toys. For example, the CPSC has issued guidelines for manufacturers for lead levels in toy jewelry. Lead paint is covered by a different standard that applies to all types of paint, whether used on toys or in homes.

Regulations for toys sold in the US are the same regardless of whether toys are produced in the US or abroad. Since foreign countries may have different and/or less stringent lead standards than the US, it may be more likely that toys produced in those countries could contain dangerous levels of lead.

What are the best measures that parents can take to protect their children from toys with unacceptable lead content and to protect children from lead exposure in general?

Parents should be aware of toy and other product recalls posted at the US Consumer Product Safety Commission web site at <http://www.cpsc.gov>. All recalled products should be removed and returned as indicated in the recall.

Elevated blood lead levels in children are most often a result of deteriorating lead paint in the home, particularly in homes built before 1978. (The use of leaded paint on interior surfaces generally ceased in the United States after 1978.) As the lead-based paint deteriorates, some of it forms a fine dust, which children may pick-up through normal play activities, crawling on the floor, and mouthing behaviors. Areas of greatest concern are door frames, window frames, floors, and porches. If your house was built before 1978, consider having your home checked for the presence of lead in paint and dust. Learn about safe ways to keep your home in good repair and learn safe methods for any home repairs, so disturbing paint during the repair work does not make the situation worse.