

Lead Poisoning Gets Closer Look As Home Hazard - Omaha World-Herald (NE) - September 20, 1987
September 20, 1987 | Omaha World-Herald (NE) | Chris Olson; World - Herald Staff Writer

Lead poisoning may be a more serious problem than health officials once thought.

The main sources are painted areas around the home.

The primary victims: children 6 and younger, who tend to put things into their mouths.

Although poisonous, lead which remains in the body for decades can have a sweet taste that children like, health officials said.

In 1978, it was banned nationwide in paint. But in previously painted homes, it can flake off, enter soil or disintegrate into airborne particles that can be eaten or inhaled.

Omaha Program Prime locations are porches and railings on the outside of a home and windowsills and ledges on the inside, said Wayne Downie, supervisor of the childhood lead poisoning program of the Omaha - Douglas County Health Department.

For 10 years, Douglas County has had the only such program in Nebraska, Downie said. It also tests children from other counties and states.

In Lincoln, testing of children for lead poisoning was done for about 10 years, but results didn't indicate the need for an ongoing program, said Gary Walsh, chief of the division of environmental health in the Lincoln - Lancaster County Health Department.

Likewise, Council Bluffs has no regular program of monitoring lead concentrations in children, said Glenn Jackson, public health director. Cases are handled on a complaint basis, he said.

Based on a statewide survey of about 2,000 Iowa children last year, the Iowa Department of Public Health has urged counties to establish screening programs, said Ken Choquette, chief of health engineering and consumer safety.

"Tests found high lead levels in some children in highly populated counties. Those counties are urged to apply to the State Health Department for funds to set up screening programs for children." Homes where children are found to have high levels of lead also should be checked to remove sources, he said.

"Homes built before lead was banned in paint are more likely to contain it than those built today," Downie said. "Those built before 1950 are even worse because lead concentrations in paint were even higher." Deteriorated, older homes are likely places for children to pick up lead fragments. Sanding painted surfaces often sends lead dust into the air during remodeling projects.

"Lead poisoning is not something you pick up in one day," Downie said. "It takes a period of time." Lower Scores For years, scientists have known that lead damages a child's mental development,

resulting in lower IQ scores, poor language skills, hyperactivity, impulsive behavior, blindness and even death.

In the past, however, only large concentrations of lead in the blood were considered harmful. Today, studies indicate smaller amounts also may cause problems.

"We used to think lead was non - hazardous in low levels," said **Dr. Carol Angle**, director of toxicology and professor of pediatrics at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

Ten years ago, 35 micrograms of lead per one - tenth of a liter of blood was considered unsafe.

In 1985, the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta said lead could cause harm when its concentration in the body reached 25 micrograms.

Further study has prompted the Environmental Protection Agency to say that 10 to 15 micrograms are cause for concern.

A nationwide EPA study indicated a reduced growth rate in 6,000 children with lead concentrations of 10 to 40 micrograms, Dr. Angle said.

A study she conducted confirmed that the growth rate of 56 Omaha children declined when lead levels were more than 30 micrograms. The rate increased when lead concentrations dropped.

Last month, Dr. Angle received a \$56,669 grant to continue studying the growth rate of 25 to 40 children with lead levels of 25 micrograms.

"Lead poisoning is serious, but it's not appearing at an alarming rate," she said. "We simply know more about the effects of lead on the body than any other compound in our environment." Testing Is Free Expanding the screening of children is a goal of the Omaha - Douglas County Health Department, Downie said.

Most children who are tested have been brought in for another reason, he said. Some parents have seen a child eating paint and have heard about the dangers.

"Lead poisoning is an overlooked problem. The potential for it exists throughout Nebraska and Iowa." Testing is provided at no charge in Omaha clinics, Downie said, and can be done in homes of Douglas County residents.

The Centers for Disease Control recommend that all children younger than 7 who live in public housing have blood levels tested for lead once a year, Dr. Angle said.

"If we find an elevated level, we go to the home and measure the lead content of the paint," Downie said. "We also do follow - up tests on the child." Owners of homes with a high content of lead in paint are asked to remove it. "Most people are cooperative about correcting the health hazard," he said, although neither Nebraska nor Iowa has laws requiring them to do so.

The cost for a two - to four - bedroom home is about \$2,500, health officials said.

A bill under consideration in Massachusetts is considered one of the strictest measures in the nation, according to the New York Times.

The bill would require lead removal before a home is sold or rented.

Tax credits, grants and loans would be provided.

Such incentives would benefit Nebraska and Iowa, Dr. Angle said.

"We may need a similar bill. Omaha may well be found to rank high on a list of areas with dangerous concentrations of lead." Soil in much of downtown Omaha is known to contain high levels of lead, she said.

"Funds may not be available to deal with the problem yet, but we may have to in the future."

CITATION (TURABIAN STYLE)

Olson, Chris. "Lead Poisoning Gets Closer Look As Home Hazard." *Omaha World-Herald (NE)*, September 20, 1987. *NewsBank: Access World News*. <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/12E0248C63704400>.

Copyright (c) 1987 Omaha World Herald