



HEALTH NEWS FROM DR. YU

Thurston County Public Health & Social Services Department

Household Products with Lead

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People have been using lead for at least 7000 years – and have recognized it as a poison for several hundred of those years. It is especially toxic to developing children, where it can cause brain and nervous system damage, behavior and learning problems, delayed growth, hearing problems, and headaches. Even very small amounts of lead can have an affect on the developing brain.

Since the 1980s lead is no longer added to most gasoline, paints, solder, fishing weights, and household batteries. **So why do we still hear about lead being a problem?**

One of the main reasons is that its residue is still found in many old products, including chipping paint in homes built before 1978, and in dust and soils. Another reason is it is still used in many products, such as in small quantities in polyvinyl chloride (PVC) as a stabilizer. And, due to gaps in regulation and imports from other countries, lead keeps turning up in household products and toys.

For example, in February 2006, a 4-year-old boy in Minnesota died of lead poisoning after swallowing a small metallic charm that came with a pair of Reebok athletic shoes, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The charms were made in China, and have been recalled by Reebok.

When a consumer or agency finds an item that has lead, they can report it to the Consumer Product Safety Council (CPSC) for further testing. If the CPSC finds a significant hazard they will order a product recall. Over the last several years the CPSC has found lead in metallic candle wicks, imported crayons, imported vinyl mini-blinds, children's jewelry, and old painted playground equipment. See their website at www.cpsc.gov for recent recalls. (If you do not have access to a computer, see "for more information," below.) A website with good photos of recalled jewelry and other items is: orgs.unca.edu/eqi/LPP/news.html

Earlier this year, the Center for Environmental Health began an investigation into children's lunchboxes made of PVC (commonly referred to as vinyl). Their testing showed that the lead in the PVC can rub off onto food or hands, and be swallowed when people eat. See this web site for more information: www.cehca.org/lunchboxes.htm

Holiday light strings for indoor or outdoor use may contain lead in the PVC wire coating. Again, small amounts of the lead can rub off on hands and then be swallowed. Some strands have labels saying they contain lead, in accordance with California's Proposition 65 law. This law requires products to carry warning labels if they are "known to the State of California to cause cancer, birth defects, or other reproductive harm." Since these labels are not found on all light strands, the absence of a label does not mean it is lead-free. To be safe, assume all light strands have some lead: have children and adults wash their hands with soap and water after handling lighting and before eating.

Here is a partial list of other household items that may contain lead.

- Food and liquids stored in lead crystal or lead-glazed pottery or porcelain
- Folk remedies that contain lead, such as "greta" and "azarcon" used to treat an upset stomach
- Garden hoses – in brass couplings or in PVC
- Imported candy containing tamarind or chili
- Wheel weights
- Computers; circuit boards (young kids should not take electronics apart)
- Old or imported cans with soldered seams
- Antique toys (painted wagons, wood toys, lead soldiers)
- Some foil and colored gift wrap and ribbons
- Decorations on glass drinking mugs

What to do

Although exposure to lead from touching household products is expected to be a minor source of lead, it may add to children's overall exposure. Here are some basic ways to reduce exposure to lead.

- Wash children's hands before they eat; wash bottles, pacifiers, and toys often.
- Wash floors and damp wipe window sills to protect kids from dust and peeling paint contaminated with lead—especially in older homes.
- Test household items you suspect may have lead with a test kit from a paint or hardware store, such as "LeadCheck Swab" or "PACE Lead Alert." Home testing is not guaranteed to be accurate.
- A diet rich in calcium and iron can help protect kids and adults from absorbing lead.

For more information, contact Thurston County Environmental Health at 360-754-3355 x7244.