

BE AWARE OF LEAD IN PAINTED TOYS

What is lead?

Lead is a heavy metal that is widely used in modern life. Lead exposure and poisoning is an age-old problem that persists to this day. Lead is a powerful poison that mostly affects the brain.

Children, whose bodies are still growing, are highly vulnerable to lead. The aim of this leaflet is to provide information on the hazards of lead, and how to prevent lead poisoning in children.

Lead-related health and social problems

High blood lead levels can cause many health problems, including:

- ▶ **Lowered IQ;**
- ▶ **Hyperactivity & difficulty in concentrating;**
- ▶ **Reading and learning difficulties at school;**
- ▶ **Hearing loss;**
- ▶ **Anaemia and abnormal growth of virtually all organs; and**
- ▶ **Permanent muscle paralysis, brain damage, coma and death (at very high doses).**

Many of these health problems are long-term and potentially irreversible, even after medical interventions to bring blood lead levels down.

The international standard for lead in toys is 90 micrograms/gram ($\mu\text{g}/\text{g}$).



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Where does lead come from?

Lead is used in many products, including paint, petrol, batteries, plumbing, computers, cellular telephones, electrical appliances, radios, music and television sets, jewellery, cables, protective clothing, fishing weights and many other items.

The focus of this information leaflet however, is the lead added to paint and used on children's toys.

How does lead get into children's bodies?

Much of the lead released from a variety of products eventually ends up in soil and house dust. When children chew their nails or suck on their fingers, toys, sticks, stones and other items, they can get plenty of lead particles into their mouths. The lead particles are then swallowed and enter the blood stream, from where they are transported to the brain and other organs.

Some children have a habit of eating non-food substances, such as paint, sand and cement (this is called pica). There



PHOTO by ANGELA MATHEE

is particular concern about children with pica, or excessive mouthing activity, since lead in their blood may accumulate over time, and reach very high concentrations.



Lead in toys in South Africa

Researchers at the Medical Research Council have recently found unacceptably high levels of lead in the paint on some children's toys, for example building blocks, puzzles, toy aeroplanes and coloured pencils. Painted toys with high lead concentrations were widely available from large toy stores, supermarkets and stationery companies, as well as craft markets and shops. While most of the affected toys were being manufactured in South Africa, some were imported from elsewhere in the world.



PHOTO by GREG MARINOVICH

What is being done to prevent lead poisoning in children?

The National Department of Health is currently drafting legislation to restrict the addition of lead to paint intended for use on children's toys, as well as on homes, schools, playground equipment and other items with which children may come into contact. This information leaflet is part of a national lead hazard awareness campaign being implemented by the Department of Health in partnership with the Medical Research Council. The Medical Research Council will also continue their research aimed at identifying places and people who are at risk of lead exposure and poisoning.

What you can do to prevent lead poisoning in children

- ▶ **When buying toys, ask for assurance that toys are lead-free.**
- ▶ **Ensure that children's furniture, playground equipment and other items have lead levels within international standards.**
- ▶ **Only buy unleaded paint for use on homes, schools, children's toys and furniture.**
- ▶ **Never burn painted wood.**
- ▶ **Discourage children from eating sand, paint chips, cement and other non-food items.**
- ▶ **Discourage children from chewing their nails or sucking their fingers.**
- ▶ **Wash children's hands often, especially after playing in dirty or dusty areas, and before eating.**
- ▶ **Keep children's play areas as clean as possible.**
- ▶ **Keep children away from areas where paint is peeling.**
- ▶ **When cleaning the house, use mopping and damp dusting. It also helps to use soapy (rather than plain) water.**
- ▶ **Don't allow children to play with old paint tins.**
- ▶ **Keep children well away from sites where painting or renovation, especially the removal of old paint, is being undertaken.**
- ▶ **Adults who work in places where leaded paint is used, for example spray-painting workshops, should try to shower and change their clothing before returning home.**
- ▶ **Try to avoid undertaking lead-related hobbies and work at home.**
- ▶ **Eat foods rich in iron, calcium, zinc and Vitamin C.**

Further information on lead hazards may be obtained from www.mrc.ac.za/healthdevelop/environment.htm or by calling (011) 643 7403

