Choose Unleaded

Could peeling paint be more perilous than poison toys?

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Safety Alert Is a tainted Dora the Explorer the number-one threat to your child's health? It may seem that way, thanks to recent recalls of popular playthings that could contain lead paint. But experts say the biggest lead danger may be your home. While lead-based paints have been barred in the U.S. since the late '70s, many older homes and apartments remain coated in the toxic stuff. Lead may also be present in soil around the house or in plumbing, which can contaminate tap water. So, "unlike a toy, which a child may not be exposed to daily, exposure from lead in old homes is continuous," says Dr. James Roberts, a spokesperson for the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Why It Matters Lower-income children and children in urban areas are more likely to live in aging housing, so our kids are particularly vulnerable—black children have nearly five times the risk of lead poisoning as white children. Kids with high lead levels can suffer a host of health woes including brain and nervous-system damage, behavioral or learning problems and delayed growth. Some adults with elevated lead levels experience fertility or pregnancy problems, hypertension or nerve disorders.

When To Test Signs of lead poisoning can include abdominal pain, constipation and learning difficulties. But since most children with high lead levels don't have symptoms, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that they be tested at 1 and 2 years old and at ages 3 to 6 if they live in or frequently visit a building built before 1950 or one built before 1978 that has been recently remodeled. Your local health department can provide more information on home testing, but skip the do-it-yourself test kits; they can give misleading results.

What You Can Do Get the lead out of your home (see below). In the case of severe lead poisoning, your doctor can prescribe medication. Eating iron-rich foods (such as spinach, eggs and beans), calcium (such as milk, cheese and yogurt) and zinc (lean red meat) also reduces a child's lead levels.

Live in an older home? These tips can help prevent problems:

- Hire pros to remove lead-based paint if your home contains it. Until then, try the temporary approach of covering it with a sealant or wallboard.

- Only drink or cook with cold tap water that you've run for 15 to 60 seconds first, as hot water is more likely to pick up lead in pipes.
- Clean any surface that might harbor lead-contaminated paint chips, using warm water and a cleaner made specifically for lead (or dust weekly).
- Remove shoes before entering your home so you don't track in lead from soil.

For more information, visit epa.gov.

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