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NEWS RELEASE

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Protect children from dangers of lead

Every year, Oregon children are exposed to hazardous levels of lead in their homes. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly one million American children under the age of six have dangerously elevated levels of lead in their blood. The Multnomah County Health Department estimates that thousands of children living in Multnomah County are at risk of lead poisoning due to dangerous levels of lead in their homes.

Lead poisoning can damage the nervous systems of young children, leading to speech, language, and behavior problems, developmental delays, and damage to hearing and kidneys. Children age 6 and under are at higher risk for lead poisoning because they are more likely to put lead-containing sources such as soil, dust, or paint chips in their mouths. Lead poisoning in pregnant women can harm the baby and make the mother ill. In adults, lead poisoning can cause high blood pressure, nerve disorders, problems with memory and concentration, muscle pains, problems with the digestive system, and fertility problems in both men and women.

Homes or apartments built before 1978, when the federal government outlawed lead-based paint, may contain lead-based paint. Lead-based paint is not necessarily a threat if it is kept in good condition. The risk of lead exposure comes when lead-based paint deteriorates by cracking, chipping, or peeling. Lead-based paint deteriorates mainly around window frames, doors, stairs, banisters, and porches. Lead dust can form when someone scrapes, sands, or heats lead-based paint. Soil around the home may also contain lead from paint that has fallen off from the outside of the home.

“Lead is not just a problem in deteriorating homes with old, chipped paint,” says Lila Wickham, manager of Multnomah County Environmental Health. “Lead dust is common inside and outside homes built before 1978. Here in Portland, families are remodeling older homes in inner-city neighborhoods and may be exposing their children to lead without realizing it. The greatest risk is in homes built before 1950.”

Pregnant women and families with children six and younger should take special care to avoid exposure to lead. The first step is to identify lead hazards in the home. While chipping paint, dust, and contaminated soil are common lead sources, other sources include household plumbing with lead solder that can leach lead into drinking water, painted toys and furniture, and lead-glazed ceramic ware.

“A blood test is the only way to find out if a child has lead poisoning. Not all medical providers will routinely test children for lead, so you may need to ask specifically about lead testing,” says Wickham. There are free lead screening clinics at [Multnomah County Health Department Community Immunizations](#), 503-988-3828, and [Josiah Hill III Clinic](#), 503-802-7389. Childcare centers that are interested in offering lead testing to groups of children can contact the Multnomah County Leadline (503-988-4000) to arrange on-site testing clinics.

For more information call Multnomah County’s LeadLine at 503-988-4000. Visit the health department’s website for tips on protecting your children from lead poisoning at www.leadline.org

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