



State of Wisconsin
Department of Health Services

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We Can End Childhood Lead Poisoning in Wisconsin

By Karen Timberlake

A state report, *The Legacy of Lead: Report on Childhood Lead Poisoning in Wisconsin 2008*, shows we have made progress in reducing childhood lead poisoning in Wisconsin, but more than 2,000 children are still found to be lead poisoned every year. In Milwaukee County alone, more than 28,000 children have been identified with lead poisoning since 1996.

That's a tragedy of many dimensions. We know that lead poisoning is completely preventable. The number one way a child is exposed to lead is from lead dust found in their own homes. Chipping and peeling lead paint creates dust on windows, floors, and porches which can get on children's hands and into their mouths.

We also know that lead poisoning interferes with a child's development. Children under age 6 are the most vulnerable because lead disrupts the brain's normal development, which can result in learning difficulties and a greater likelihood of behavior problems like aggression and hyperactivity.

A child with lead poisoning may not show any symptoms of being poisoned. The only way to know a child is lead poisoned is to have a blood test. It's important to test pre-school age children who are at-risk for lead poisoning because we can intervene and limit damage to a child's mind and ability to learn.

Lead poisoning also places an enormous burden on affected children, their families and society as a whole. With each poisoning that we prevent, we not only avoid unnecessary human tragedy, but the financial savings alone are estimated to be \$40,000 - \$50,000 per child. Also, the confirmed link between childhood lead poisoning and criminal activity suggests that a lead-free Wisconsin would be a safer Wisconsin.

Yet, the solution is as plain as the paint on our walls. Children living in Wisconsin are at higher risk for lead poisoning than children living in most other states, because much of Wisconsin's housing stock was built before 1950 when lead paint was still being widely used. Milwaukee County has more than 152,000 dwellings built before 1950 (about 40 percent of its housing stock) that could contain lead-based paint hazards. Anyone living in pre-1950s housing should get their children screened.

The Legacy of Lead: Report on Childhood Lead Poisoning in Wisconsin 2008 report provides details about the causes of lead poisoning. Critical lead issues found in the report include:

- More than 40,000 children have been found to be lead poisoned in Wisconsin since 1996.
- Lead-poisoned children were identified in each of Wisconsin's 72 counties.
- There is no safe level of lead in the body; even very low levels of lead exposure can cause permanent brain damage.
- Lead poisoning is associated with a greater chance that a child will experience problems in school. These problems can lead to higher rates of high school dropout, teen pregnancy, juvenile delinquency, and violent crime.
- Lead poisoning in childhood is associated with a higher chance of having a heart attack or stroke as an adult.

Preventing lead poisoning will require the collective efforts of many people and organizations. But we can do it, if we work together and make good use of resources that are available.

Karen Timberlake is the Secretary of the Department of Health Services. The Department protects and promotes the health and safety of the people of Wisconsin.