

Lead Poisoning in Polk County January, 2006

Hundreds of Polk County children are poisoned each year from deteriorating lead paint in older homes. If the poisoning is left untreated, children, especially those under age six, can have long-term health effects, like learning disabilities, hyperactivity and brain damage. If the poisoning is severe enough, it can result in coma and even death.

“Yes, lead poisoning is still a problem,” says Bonnie Murphy, Lead Program Coordinator for Polk County Health Department. “Most people assume that since lead paint was outlawed in 1978, it just went away. Well, it didn’t.”

Iowa ranks fourth among states for the percentage of homes built before 1940, so there are many buildings that still have lead paint on them. “Children in these homes get exposed from ingesting lead-paint chips or the lead-paint dust on their hands or toys,” says Polk County lead inspector, Joan Weiser.

“Windows—especially the trim, trough and tracks—and bare soil around the foundation are two of the most likely sources of lead exposure,” Weiser says. She adds that people and pets can also track contaminated soil from outside. Remodeling projects involving sawing, drilling or sanding old paint can release significant amounts of lead dust into the air (see sidebar).

Polk County Health Department, along with other government and non-profit agencies and individuals, is part of the Polk County Lead Coalition. The group is working to raise public awareness of lead poisoning, increase the number of children having blood tests, and make sure there are more lead-safe homes. Polk County, along with the City of Des Moines, is applying for a grant from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for funds to help clean up lead hazards in older homes.

The Polk County Board of Supervisors passed a new regulation that took effect January 18, 2006. The regulation provides for the inspection and correction of lead-based paint hazards in locations where exposed children test positive for elevated blood lead levels.

Reducing your risk of lead poisoning

Get your child's blood tested for lead poisoning at the age of one and two. Insist on it. Monitor your child's environment from birth until the age of six, the period when children are most vulnerable to contamination. Clean children's hands, toys and pacifiers frequently.

Know the age and history of your home, and every building where your child spends time. Houses built before 1950 are the biggest risk, but buildings up to 1978 may contain lead paint.

Learn how to use lead-safe construction practices and lead-safe landscaping practices and how to clean up lead contaminated areas. For information, call Polk County Health Department's Children's Lead Poisoning Prevention Program at 286-2221. The Health Department also has equipment and supplies available for some kinds of lead paint-related projects.

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Nationally, the rate of lead poisoning is 1.6% of children under the age of six.

The average rate across Polk County is 4.8% of children under age six. But some neighborhoods have rates as high as 13% because they have a much higher percentage of older homes. Unfortunately, some of the neighborhoods with the oldest homes have a much lower percentage of children tested, so the actual poisoning rate may be higher still.