

Lead paint and hazards

Medical and scientific research shows that absorption of even very low levels of lead into the blood may have harmful health effects on the intellectual and behavioural development of infants and young children.

Lead-based paint is a dangerous source of lead but precautions can be taken to reduce exposure. Removing, repairing or disturbing lead paint through normal wear-and-tear such as paint on doors, windows, stairs and railings can expose you and your family to health risks.

Before you begin renovations, consider the following information in order to minimize the health risks to you and your family.

What are the health hazards of lead exposure?

Exposure to lead-based paint usually occurs from ingestion. Lead-based paint does not present a health hazard as long as the paint is not chipping, flaking, crushed or sanded into dust.

Low levels of exposure to lead can cause health effects such as learning disabilities and behavioural problems in children. High levels of exposure to lead may cause lead poisoning and other issues such as anemia and impaired brain and nervous system functions.

Currently there is no known safe level of lead exposure and no known safe blood lead concentration. However, as lead exposure increases, the range and severity of symptoms and effects also increases.

While the public's exposure to lead has decreased over the years, lead can still be a problem. It is important to be aware of lead sources so you can minimize your health risks.

Who is at higher risk?

Infants, children and pregnant women are at higher risk. Toddlers and children can ingest lead because of their frequent hand-to-mouth activity and tendency to mouth or chew objects. Children absorb and retain more lead into their bodies compared to adults. For

pregnant women, even low levels of lead can affect the growth of the developing baby.

Does my home contain lead-based paint?

Lead-based paint was commonly used in homes built before 1960. Both exterior and interior paint produced between 1960 and 1990 may also contain lead in smaller amounts. All post-1992 consumer paint produced in Canada or the United States for indoor use is virtually lead-free.

Since 2010, paint in Canada containing more than 0.009% lead must be labeled to indicate that it is not safe to use in areas accessible to children or pregnant women. When painting your home, make sure that the paint you use for the interior is lead-free.

Exterior paints used for the outside of a house may contain lead. If it contains lead, the paint will have a warning label.

How can I test my home?

You can check painted surfaces for lead by using a home lead test kit or sending a paint chip sample to a certified laboratory. A licensed contractor, who has the proper x-ray equipment to detect lead on painted surfaces, can also tell you if your house has leaded paint. Contact your local health authority environmental health officer for more information.

Should lead-based paint be removed?

Sometimes leaving lead-based paint alone is safer than removing it, as long as it is not chipping or within the reach of children. Whenever you disturb surfaces with lead paint, you risk creating hazardous lead dust even if the lead paint is covered with new paint. To reduce the chance of exposure to lead-based paint, surfaces in good condition can be covered with non-lead paint, vinyl wallpaper, wallboard or paneling.

How do I safely remove lead-based paint?

Certain precautions can help minimize the risk. Follow these safety tips when removing lead-based paint from walls, ceilings and other structures, or when

sanding or knocking down a wall. These tips will help protect you and your family's health during renovations. Depending on the difficulty of the work involved, it might be a good idea to hire a trained professional.

Protect your family

Children are more sensitive to the effects of lead than adults. Children and women who are pregnant or trying to become pregnant should avoid exposure to lead. If there is a chance your home will be contaminated with lead dust during renovations, move toddlers, preschool children, and pregnant women elsewhere until the work is done.

Protect yourself

Wear appropriate protective clothing such as coveralls, goggles, gloves, and most importantly, a U.S. National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) approved respirator for dust, mist, and fumes to reduce the possible intake of lead. Consult your local safety equipment dealer. Do not eat, drink, or smoke in an area where paint is being removed.

Prepare the area

To prevent spreading paint chips and dust to other parts of the house, remove children and pets and seal the area and all heating vents.

Protect the entrance to the working area with plastic to contain dust. Remove all drapes, rugs, furniture, and household items from the area. Cover objects that cannot be moved, including the floor, with heavy plastic, and seal with tape. Fill a spray bottle with water and a small amount of detergent to wet all surfaces and to contain any dust during renovations or clean-up.

If working outdoors, use drop sheets to catch any paint scrapings, avoid windy days and cover windows and doors with plastic to keep scrapings and dust out of the house.

Use safe stripping techniques

Use techniques that do not spread lead dust or fumes. Chemical stripping produces the least amount of lead dust. As chemical stripping agents also contain potentially harmful substances, they must be used with care. Mechanical removal through sanding or grinding produces more lead dust.

Do not spread the dust around

Turn off forced air heating and air conditioning systems and cover vents with taped plastic sheeting. Remove protective clothing and footwear whenever you leave the work area. Wash work clothes separately from other laundry or discard them when you are finished.

Do a daily clean-up

At the end of each day, wetting the dust and wet-wiping will help clean up and prevent dust from spreading. Put all waste into a secure container or sealed plastic bag. Mark the bag as hazardous waste. Vacuum with a HEPA vacuum cleaner. Wash your hands, face, tools and your personal protective equipment once your work is done and before you enter a clean area.

Do a final clean-up

Wait at least 1 day after completing work to let any dust settle and then do a final clean-up. Wet wipe all surfaces and put the plastic used to contain the area in a sealed plastic bag for disposal.

For more information

To contact your local health authority environmental health officer, visit

www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/about-bc-s-health-care-system/partners/health-authorities/regional-health-authorities or call:

- Fraser Health 604 587-4600
- Interior Health 250 862-4200
- Island Health 250 370-8699
- Northern Health 250 565-2649
- Vancouver Coastal Health 604 736-2033

For First Nations communities, contact your local environmental health officer at the First Nations Health Authority by visiting www.fnha.ca/contact-us.

For more information about lead in your home, read Steps to lead safe renovations, repair and painting developed by the United States Environmental Protection Agency at www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2013-11/documents/steps_0.pdf (PDF 5.01 MB)