

# Lead Poisoning Still Threat

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.)—Lead poisoning, a health hazard that can be traced back to the days of the Roman Empire, is still very much a viable threat to adults and especially children in many homes across the United States, says an expert in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences.

children under age 6 have unsafe levels of lead in their blood, according to the 1990 census. Phyllis Adams, associate professor of agricultural education and extension, estimates about 56 million homes across the country contain some leaded material—approximately 3 million tons altogether.

ing from lead poisoning have been known for centuries, exposure to lead has continued to be a common problem in both technologically advanced and developing countries," Adams says. "In the United States, lead poisoning continues to be one of the most prevalent and preventable childhood health problems."

lead can be found in paint, water, pipes and dust. Adams says lead poisoning cases most often occur in run-down, decaying multiple family housing and during renovation projects. Indeed, Children's Hospital in Boston reported that 40 percent of its lead poisoning cases between 1987 and 1990 were the result of home renovation projects.

Symptoms of lead poisoning, which include stomach aches, headaches, irritability, vomiting, constipation, and fatigue, often do not appear until lead levels are very high. In addition, most of the symptoms can be easily confused with the flu, which makes diagnosis difficult.

Although lead-related health problems can affect adults, Adams says lead poisoning is particularly harmful to children. Children affected by lead can have delayed mental development, speech and hearing defects, and damage to the central nervous system. In adults, lead can affect production of red blood cells and impair liver and kidney functions. Lead traces also are stored in the skeleton—sometimes for decades—and can re-enter the bloodstream of a pregnant mother and harm the fetus. Mothers who have been exposed to lead also can pass the substance through breast milk.

In any home built before 1960,

# Vegetable Consumption Study Unveiled

RIDGEWAY (Elk Co.) — As nutrition research continues to show that consuming plenty of fruits and vegetables may prevent cancer and ensure good health, it is not surprising that many people know to include more produce in their diets.

But according to a new study, Fruit and Vegetable Consumption: Consumer Attitudes versus Behavior, Americans are consum-

ing much less produce than they believe.

The study, commissioned by the United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association, examined menu diaries kept by 2,000 households. While 96 percent agreed that people should include more fruits and vegetables in their diets, consumers overestimated the amount of fruits and vegetables they really ate by an astounding 33 percent.

Most startling, two of the most health-conscious groups — women and young adults — are the worst offenders. On average, women overstated their consumption of fruits and vegetables by 40 percent (4.78 reported servings/day compared to 2.89 actual servings) and young adults (ages 18-34) overestimated their actual consumption by 43 percent (4.70 reported servings of fruits and

vegetables compared to 2.68 actual servings.)

On the opposite end of the food guide pyramid, consumers greatly underestimated the amount of fats, oils and sweets consumed. People reported they ate just two servings of these products a day (1.96 servings/day), when in reality they consumed 3.80 servings/day — nearly twice as much as perceived.

"Excess exposure to lead affects children of all socioeconomic backgrounds," Adams says. "It is very important for all infants and their siblings under age 6 to be screened for the presence of lead in their system."

The biggest source of lead in most homes built before 1978 is lead-based paint. Sale of the product was banned in 1978, but Adams says all types of paint manufactured prior to the ban could contain lead. Particularly suspect are the high-gloss products used on moldings, trim, bathrooms and kitchens. Painted windows, which produce lead-laden dust from frequently being opened and closed, are often a prime suspect in lead poisoning cases. Window sills, which are a tempting target for teething toddlers, are also very high risk areas.

Homeowners can protect themselves by covering the lead-based paint with a latex or oil-based paint. If the paint is bubbling or cracking, Adams recommends hiring professionals to remove it or carefully following professional lead-removal guidelines. Do-it-yourselfers should never try to sand, scrape or remove paint with chemicals or heat guns unless the paint has been tested.

"Sanding and scraping can produce lethal levels of dust that everyone in the household may breathe in," Adams says. "Chemical removers and heat guns can also give off lead-laden fumes."

Lead also can be found in water pipes fastened together with lead-based solder. In very old homes, entire pipes may be made from lead. Adams recommends testing a home's water system. If the water has high levels of lead, she suggests letting water run for several minutes before using it. In addition, hot water leaches lead from pipes faster than cold water, a factor that may require the homeowner to update the plumbing.

Lead also can be found in stained glass, ceramic glazes on dishes and pottery from outside the United States, car and industrial emissions, jewelry, batteries, fishing sinkers and souvenirs.

Because lead threats are rarely noticed until levels are very high, Adams recommends an aggressive prevention program. Children should be given a blood test for lead, which is just a simple finger prick, at 12 months and at 24 months. A balanced diet based on foods high in iron and calcium is also beneficial.

"Children should wash their hands often," Adams says. "Damp mop and dust your home often—especially near windows and doors. Homeowners also can wash surfaces frequently with a solution of water and tri-sodium phosphate or powdered dishwashing detergent."

Homeowners can test for surface lead levels by removing a sample for laboratory testing. Professionals also can use X-ray fluorescence, which does not disturb the paint surface. Do-it-yourself kits are available, but these products will not indicate how much lead is present.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency offers a guide called "Reducing Lead Hazards When Remodeling Your Home." Call (717) 783-8451 for a free copy. Information on lead abatement also is available free of charge from such agencies as the Consumer Products Safety Commission (404) 730-2870, the National Safety Council (800) 424-5323, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (800) 743-5323.

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