

Lead and lead poisoning

Lead is highly toxic and can cause a range of health issues. Before 1965, many paints used on New Zealand houses had high lead levels. If a building was built in the 1980s or earlier, it is best to presume that it has been painted with lead-based paint. When you come into contact with lead, you risk getting an unsafe amount in your body. WorkSafe New Zealand determines the safe level of lead in blood for workers. Symptoms of lead poisoning can vary from person to person, and damaging levels of lead may be reached before symptoms appear.

Why is lead harmful?

High lead levels can damage the brain. Effects are worse in a young child or an unborn child in the womb as their brains are still developing.

Lead can harm many parts of your body, including your blood, bones and teeth, muscles, kidney, and brain and nervous system.

Treatment

Lead poisoning is diagnosed by measuring the amount of lead in blood. Anyone with raised lead levels needs to prevent further exposure.

Severe lead poisoning may require hospital treatment.

Prevention

The best way to reduce the risk of lead poisoning is by limiting your exposure to lead dust:

- **Wear personal protective equipment (PPE).** This will reduce the risk of breathing in or swallowing lead dust.
- **Wash your hands,** including before eating, drinking or smoking
- **Avoid bringing home work tools or personal protective equipment** used for activities involving lead
- **Wash work clothing separately to other items.** This reduces the risk of lead dust rubbing off onto your clothes and your family's clothes

Other sources of lead

It's important to be aware of sources of lead exposure to protect yourself and your whānau. People working with lead, lead paint or products containing lead may be at risk of exposure, especially if PPE is not worn correctly or if hand washing is difficult. Other sources of lead could include:

- Old or imported toys that have been painted
- Soil or gardens containing old petrol and paint
- Visiting indoor shooting ranges
- Heating or melting lead weights
- Taking ayurvedic, Chinese or other traditional medicines or cosmetics.

Symptoms

The early stages of lead poisoning in adults can vary from person to person, and damaging levels may be reached before symptoms appear.

Symptoms that affect the brain or nervous system can include:

- Mood changes (such as depression or irritability)
- Memory impairment
- Sleep disturbance
- Headaches
- Tingling and numbness in fingers and hands

Symptoms that affect the gut can include:

- Nausea
- Diarrhoea
- Constipation
- Stomach pains
- Lack of appetite
- Weight loss

If you are experiencing symptoms

If you are experiencing symptoms, talk to your doctor or call Healthline at 0800 611 116 for free any time.

There are interpreters available 24/7 if English is not your first language.

Who is at risk

Lead can be carried to an unborn child through a mother's blood. If a mother is exposed to lead, it may affect her baby while in the womb. Exposure to lead can cause premature birth or low birth weight, as well as later problems with development.

For more information

For more information, please see the Manatū Hauora (Ministry of Health) website on [lead poisoning](#).

If you are concerned about lead poisoning, call Healthline for free on 0800 611 116 or contact your doctor or practice nurse. There are interpreters available 24/7 to help you in your language.