Be Mindful Of Lead Exposure

The University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development

Janine was vaguely aware of the danger of lead, but it never occurred to her that she needed to be concerned about it. Then, a plumber discovered a large section of the water pipe in Janine's 70-year-old house was made of lead. The plumber recommended she replace it immediately.

Janine was suspicious at first. Was ripping out a perfectly functional section of pipe really necessary? Or was the plumber trying to drum up additional work for himself?

But after doing a little checking, she quickly concluded that the potential risks of lead exposure – no matter how small – outweigh the costs of the job.

Lead is a powerful poison linked to a range of health problems. Lead poisoning can affect anyone, but children's developing nervous systems are especially vulnerable.

Problems paying attention, hyperactivity, and irritability can result from children being exposed to even small amounts of lead. Learning problems, delayed growth, and hearing loss have been linked to higher levels of exposure. Permanent brain damage and death may result from children being exposed to very high levels.

Like Janine, you should make sure your home is lead-free.

The main sources of lead in the home are usually lead-based paint and lead pipes that carry water. In the United States, the risk of lead exposure is greater in homes built before 1950.

Lead-based paints are harmful to children who chew on painted toys and furnishings and eat paint peelings from the walls.

Some water faucets contain brass, which is a copper and lead alloy. Hot water may cause lead to be extracted from brass, so don't drink it. You should replace brass faucets with stainless steel. If that is not possible, run cold water through brass faucets for at least 10 seconds before drinking it or cooking with it.

Other possible sources of lead exposure include some glass and ceramics. To be safe, do not feed babies from lead crystal bottles. And don't store acidic foods, such as fruit juices, in ceramic containers. If you are pregnant, avoid drinking from ceramic mugs.

Most children with lead poisoning do not show any symptoms. If you think your child might have been exposed to lead, have a doctor check your child's lead level. Medications can help reduce it.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., Co-Director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.