

Scientists Conclude Childhood Lead Poisoning is No Longer a Widespread Public Health Threat

By ACSH Staff — December 1, 1997

Lead poisoning is often cited as the number one environmental health concern for children. A panel of physicians and scientists affiliated with the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH) has concluded, however, that for the majority of American children, lead poisoning is a condition of the past.

According to a new report from ACSH, *Lead and Human Health*, symptomatic childhood lead "poisoning," often seen until the 1970s, has ceased to exist as a widespread public health threat in the United States. Findings from the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) confirm that only 0.4% of all children 1 to 5 years of age in the U.S. may be at greater risk for health complications due to lead exposure. Problems in localized areas continue to exist, however. And certain sociodemographic factors (e.g., young age, race/ethnicity, and low income level) continue to be associated with higher blood lead levels.

The blood lead levels (the principle indicator of lead exposure) of the general population has declined significantly within the past decade due to the removal of environmental lead exposures from paint, soldered cans, gasoline, and plumbing systems. Already the mean blood lead levels in children have fallen from 15 micrograms of lead in 100 cc of blood ($\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$) in 1976 to 2.3 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$ in 1994.

Unfortunately, the general public remains confused about the risk of lead exposure and poisoning. For example, *Sesame Street Lead Away!*, a \$1.2 million lead poisoning awareness campaign unveiled earlier this month by the Prudential Foundation, cites lead poisoning as the number one environmental health concern for children. Misinformation such as this and the ability of scientists to monitor ever-smaller amounts of trace elements in the environment add to the confusion. Compounded to this is the CDC's practice of continually lowering the blood action level for lead based on speculative and inconclusive findings of potential effects. Today, the recommended action level the blood lead level at which the CDC advises some intervention or monitoring has been set at 10 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$; a level which nearly 9 of every 10 American children had during the 1970s and 1980s.

"It is imperative that parents understand that a blood lead level of 10 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$ does not mean that your child is lead poisoned," says Dr. Elizabeth Whelan, president of ACSH. "Lead poisoning in children is associated with levels greater than 70 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$. While lead clearly can be toxic to humans, one must not forget that the level of exposure and absorbed dose are critical determinants in the potential occurrence of adverse effects. Trace amounts of lead to which humans are exposed are not believed to be toxicologically significant and should not pose a health risk to humans."

"For the majority of Americans," adds Dr. Whelan, "lead poisoning is not a concern. However, elevated levels continue to exist for certain population groups. For these children, an intervention approach based on education and lead exposure reduction and prevention is recommended."

The American Council on Science and Health is a consortium of more than 250 scientists.

To obtain a copy of Lead and Human Health, send \$5.00 (price includes postage and handling) to:
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