

# Old lead paint

Lead Safe fact sheet 1

## Lead and your health

Because lead is cheap and useful, it is found in many products and in many places in the environment.

Lead can affect anybody, but children under the age of four and pregnant women are most at risk. Lead can affect children by causing learning and attention problems, hearing loss, slowed growth and behaviour problems.

Lead can affect adults too. Low levels of exposure can cause joint and muscle pain, high blood pressure and infertility. Higher levels can cause memory loss, nerve problems and, at very high levels, fits.

Lead gets into our bodies when we breathe in lead dust and fumes in air, or if we eat food or drink water that contains lead. Children can rapidly pick up lead through normal hand-to-mouth activity. Small amounts can gradually build up in the body and cause health problems.

## Why is lead in paint?

Most Australian houses built before 1970 contain lead paint. Some types of paints manufactured before 1970 contained up to 50% lead. The recommended amount of lead in domestic paint declined from 50% to 1% by 1965. In 1992, it was reduced to 0.25%, and in 1997 it was further reduced to 0.1%.

Prior to 1970 lead was used as a drying agent, as colouring (often white, red, orange, yellow and scarlet) and to protect iron from rusting. Lead paint has thus been used extensively in Australian buildings.

## Where was lead paint used?

Generally, the older the house, the more lead paint is present. Lead paints made before 1970 were used both inside and outside the house:

- timber, plaster and cement-rendered walls as pink primers (undercoats) or enamel paints
- framing and fittings such as window frames, skirting boards, gutters, fascia and verandah rails
- metal surfaces that can rust, such as wrought iron, cast iron lace and window bars.

Lead paint is still used on industrial buildings, heavy machinery, ships and boats. Industrial paints containing more than 0.5% lead have warnings on the can.

## When is lead paint a danger?

Lead paint becomes dangerous when it peels, chinks (breaks down into dust) or flakes off the surface it's on. Larger pieces of paint can be eaten by children and pets. Fine dust can be breathed in or can contaminate the house, its contents and the surrounding area.

Paint in good condition can still be knocked or rubbed off by the movement of doors and windows, or from normal wear and tear.

Some types of home maintenance and renovation activities can disturb lead paint and cause serious hazards for you, your family and neighbours. Many of these hazards can be minimised if you take the right precautions and use the right equipment.

## What you can do

### Test for lead paint

Assume paint in pre-1970 houses contains lead unless tests prove otherwise. Test paint in all parts of your home and yard before you start work. Hire a professional lead assessor or collect samples yourself and have them tested by a laboratory (see 'How to get advice', below). Do-it-yourself test kits are available at hardware stores but are not as reliable as a professional assessor.

If the paint is in good condition leave it alone – don't create a problem where one doesn't exist.

Get a professional experienced in lead-safe work to remove old paint. If you do decide to remove it yourself take full precautions (see 'How to get advice', below).

### Protect yourself and your family during renovations

- Children and pregnant women should move out during renovations until the clean-up is finished.
- Wash hands and face before meals, and shower and change clothes when you finish work.
- Don't smoke or carry cigarettes in the work area as you can breathe in lead dust that settles on them. Wash hands before smoking to stop lead from entering your mouth.
- Wash work clothes separately from all other clothes and rinse the washing machine afterwards.



Sources of lead paint in pre 1970 houses



### Prevent lead hazards during renovations

#### Prepare the work area being renovated

**Outside:** Lay plastic sheeting under the work area to protect your garden and children's play area. Close windows and doors. Warn your neighbours so they can protect themselves if dust blows their way.

**Inside:** Seal the work area off from the rest of the house and outside by covering floors, doors and windows with plastic and tape. Remove soft furnishings, curtains, carpets and other household items. If this is not possible then cover them with plastic.

#### Use the right equipment and practices to renovate

Wet-sanding and wet-scraping are the safest methods of preparing the surface.

If you are likely to create lead dust or fumes, always wear an AS-1716-approved respirator fitted with P1 (dust) or P2 (dust and fumes) filters and coveralls to prevent exposure. Simple paper filters do not offer protection from fine dust.

Do not use open-flame torches on lead paint as they create lead fumes. If you must use a heat gun, use the lowest setting to keep the paint temperature below 370°C.

Dry-sanding can produce large amounts of lead dust so it is advisable to wet the surface as you work.

Most solvent or caustic chemical strippers are a danger to you and the environment. It is important to strictly follow the manufacturer's instructions when using these.

#### Clean up carefully after renovations

Clean up after renovating before pregnant women and children return to the property.

**Don't sweep.** To clean up use a high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) vacuum cleaner, not a domestic vacuum cleaner. **Wet –** wash the entire work area with a phosphate detergent (e.g. liquid sugar soap) and then rinse with clean water.

If you have been working in the ceiling cavity, first have it cleaned thoroughly with a HEPA vacuum cleaner (these can be hired; see 'How to get advice' section below). Don't do this work yourself: hire a professional.

Dispose of waste in sealed heavy duty plastic bags in your rubbish bin.

#### How to get advice

Contact your local council for information on lead in houses and buildings and lead safe renovations. For information on lead and the environment call the NSW EPA's Environment Line on 131 555 or for more information on lead-based paint visit the EPA website at [www.epa.nsw.gov.au/mao/leadbasedpaint.htm](http://www.epa.nsw.gov.au/mao/leadbasedpaint.htm)

You can also take a look at the Australian Government's six step guide to painting your home at: [www.environment.gov.au/protection/publications/lead-alert-six-step-guide-painting-your-home](http://www.environment.gov.au/protection/publications/lead-alert-six-step-guide-painting-your-home) and lead alert facts [www.environment.gov.au/protection/publications/factsheet-lead-alert-facts-lead-house-paint](http://www.environment.gov.au/protection/publications/factsheet-lead-alert-facts-lead-house-paint)

For further information and advice about protecting yourself from lead, about qualified paint inspection and removal services, and guidelines for safe home renovation, call:

**Lead Advisory Service NSW 1800 626 086 or (02) 9716 0014**

Ask your doctor if you want to know more about blood tests or the effects of lead on health.

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