

CHILDHOOD LEAD POISONING

Even small amounts of lead can permanently harm a child's brain development. In 2024, 116,227 of Georgia's children were screened for lead. Of those, 3,450 children had lead levels measuring 3.5 µg/dL or more.¹

WHAT IS LEAD EXPOSURE AND POISONING?

Lead exposure happens when a child swallows or breathes in lead or lead dust.² Once inside the body, lead quickly enters the bloodstream. There is no safe amount of lead in a child's blood.

**Lead poisoning is defined
as 3.5 µg/dL (micrograms per deciliter).³**

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN CHILDREN ARE EXPOSED TO LEAD?

Children's bodies absorb lead more easily, affecting the brain and other physical development in organs and the nervous system.⁴ Children under age 6 are at the greatest risk of lead poisoning.⁵ Even low levels of lead can result in:⁶



Speech, language, and behavior problems



Learning disabilities and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)



Lower IQ



Nervous system damage

Exposure to elevated blood lead levels can cause serious health problems, including seizures, coma, intellectual and developmental disabilities, and even death. Treatment is costly and can worsen existing health conditions.⁷ Prenatal exposure increases the risk of miscarriage, premature birth, and can cause lasting damage to a baby's brain, kidneys, and nervous system.⁸

THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM IN GEORGIA



Of Georgia's 159 counties, **16** were identified as locations where children may have a higher risk of being exposed to lead: Bibb, Chatham, Clayton, Cobb, Colquitt, DeKalb, Dougherty, Floyd, Fulton, Gwinnett, Hall Houston, Laurens, Muscogee, Richmond, and Troup.⁹

According to 2021 Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) data, childhood lead poisoning is more prevalent in Asian, Black, and Multiracial children than White children.¹⁰

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WHERE IS LEAD FOUND?



Water

Drinking water can be contaminated when it passes through older lead pipes, newer brass pipes, or copper pipes that are joined with lead solder.¹¹



Soil

Lead-based exterior paint flakes can pollute yards, playgrounds, industrial sources, or other sites. Lead is naturally occurring and can be found in high concentrations in some areas.¹²



Toys and Other Items

May be present in those imported from other countries.¹³



Paint

Older dwellings (those built prior to 1978) are more likely to contain lead-based paint. The use of lead in residential paints was banned in 1978.¹⁴



Herbal or Folk Remedies

Greta, azarcon, and other traditional medicines from India, China, Bhutan, and others can contain lead.¹⁵



Small Metal Objects

Can be swallowed by children.¹⁶

PROGRESS FOR GEORGIA'S KIDS

In 2022, Georgia signed into law stronger protections for children who may be exposed to lead.^{17, 18} The legislation supports GaDPH in:

- hiring additional lead inspectors statewide to investigate cases of lead exposure;
- educating families on exposure reduction; and,
- engaging with property owners to reduce and eliminate lead sources.

The Clean Water for Georgia Kids Program supports schools and early care and education (ECE) programs through testing, communications, and providing low-cost recommendations on how to remove lead from drinking and cooking water. The program is funded by the Environmental Protection Agency and is free to participants.

PROTECTING YOUR FAMILY FROM LEAD POISONING

- ☒ Have your child tested
- ☒ Clean regularly
- ☒ Test your water
- ☒ Check your home for hazards
- ☒ Remove shoes or wipe off soil before entering the house

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Secure funding to support early childhood education (ECE) programs in removing and replacing lead pipes, fixtures, and other sources of contamination.
- Update Georgia law to require blood lead level monitoring and mitigation for women of childbearing age and for children under six. (DPH)
- Create a multi-year plan for testing and removing lead in drinking water and built environments at schools, childcare centers, and other places where children spend time.* Explore federal, state, and private funding options to cover costs.
- Expand partnerships to increase the number of sites offering blood lead testing (e.g., clinics, labs, and other points of care). (DPH)
- Work with Care Management Organizations (CMOs) to increase well-child visits and ensure required Medicaid lead screenings are completed.** Confirm that Medicaid/DCH is accurately monitoring and reporting these screenings. (DCH)
- Investigate and address environments where children have blood lead levels at or above the CDC action level, with a priority on children under age three. (DPH, GEPD)

*Consider leveraging the Georgia Lead Poisoning Prevention Act of 1994 to develop lead testing and mitigation strategies for drinking water.¹⁹

**Medicaid (federal) requires that every state provides at least 80% of Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic and Treatment (EPSDT) recipients with timely medical screenings, including lead screening for under age 6.²⁰ Federal data show that from 2015 to 2019, Medicaid lead screening rates steadily declined in Georgia (from approximately 108,000 to 96,000 for ages 0-6.²¹ Note: Medicaid reported that this data was incorrectly reported so numbers will vary.

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