Preventing Childhood Lead Poisoning in Ohio

Childhood lead poisoning is considered the most preventable environmental disease among young children, yet thousands of children are lead poisoned each year across the United States.

Ohio law requires all healthcare providers to administer blood lead tests to children at ages 1 and 2, or up to age 6 if no previous test has been completed based on the following criteria: the child is on Medicaid, lives in a high-risk ZIP code, or has certain other risk factors. The Ohio Department of Health (ODH) offers a range of information and resources here about childhood lead poisoning for healthcare providers, including a summary of Ohio's child lead testing requirements, medical management recommendations for children receiving blood lead tests, prenatal risk assessment for lead, a lead poisoning desk reference guide, and identification and management of lead exposure in pregnant and lactating women.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) uses a blood lead reference value (BLRV) to identify children with elevated levels of lead in their blood. In October 2021, CDC updated the BLRV to 3.5 micrograms per deciliter (µg/dL). This updated reference value is the level at which the CDC recommends public health actions be initiated to mitigate the source of lead exposure. ODH will soon update its medical management recommendations to reflect CDC's updated BLRV.

There is no known safe level of lead in the body. The effects of lead exposure cannot be corrected or reversed, and even low levels of lead in blood have been shown to affect IQ, ability to pay attention, and academic achievement. Not every child will experience the same outcome for the same blood lead level. In addition to amount and length of exposure, factors influencing how lead will affect a child include individual genetic differences, timing of exposure, and presence of protective factors such as nutrition.

Children can be exposed to lead in many ways, but most exposure happens when children put things into their mouths while playing. Lead was used in house paint until 1978, and any house built before that year could have lead paint. Chips from this paint can be ingested or ground into dust, which can be eaten or inhaled. Lead can also be found in soil, water, and certain items that come from other countries. Many children with lead poisoning have no signs at first, which makes it hard to diagnose and treat their poisoning early.

ODH is committed to reducing the number of children with elevated blood lead levels in Ohio. ODH and its statewide partners continue to provide lead poisoning awareness education, blood lead testing surveillance, monitoring of the licensed professional industry, direct services to affected families, and administration of lead hazard control funding to control lead hazards in homes.

While the prevalence of confirmed elevated blood lead levels among tested Ohio children has declined significantly during the past 20 years, much work remains to be done to eliminate lead hazards and continue to reduce the number of children lead poisoned each year. For more information about this issue, go to the ODH lead webpage here.