

Lead poisoning is still damaging Michigan kids

By Lester Graham

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There's one kind of pollution that researchers believe robs kids of their future like no other.

Scientists have found evidence it diminishes their intelligence, causes behavioral problems, even increases the likelihood they'll end up in prison.

This toxin's damage is known.

We even know how to protect children from being exposed to it.

Yet tens of thousands of Michigan children are poisoned by lead every day.



Decades of lead paint can deteriorate, leaving lead dust or paint chips on the floor. Lead tastes sweet to children.

Credit Lester Graham / Michigan Radio

Jessica Jeffries showed me the work that was done on her upper-floor apartment of a two-story house in Detroit.

“Maybe like the next week or so we should be up here because I got my paint. Once I get the paint, all it is is to put my furniture back up,” she said.

As we're looking at it right now, the walls have splotches of white paint here and there. The steps we climbed are newly tiled. There are new doors and doorjambs. And there are new windows. These were funded in part by grants to help prevent lead poisoning.

It would be impossibly expensive to get all the lead out of an old house. Decades of painted walls and window sills are coated with lead paint. Lead in paint wasn't banned until 1978. This house was likely built in the 1920s.



Speaking about old houses, "They may be full of lead, but it's only a hazard if it's chipping or peeling," Paul Kelley of Clear Corps explained.

Credit Lester Graham / Michigan Radio

Paul Kelley is with Clear Corps. That's a non-profit organization that is part of the lead abatement effort in Michigan. He says the way you stop lead exposure is to seal it up.

"As for the walls, like these walls here, they're really stable and are in good condition. They may be full of lead, but it's only a hazard if it's chipping or peeling," Kelley explained.

Paint on the outside of the house deteriorates faster. The windows will be sealed with aluminum covers. But decades of chipping, then scraping the paint for repainting and so on means there's a lot of lead in the soil near the house. That will be covered up with wood chips or mulch. Even with that done, Jessica Jeffries says she's not going to let her little girl play in the dirt outside.

With good reason. She got the scare of her life when she found out her three-year-old girl was lead poisoned.

"I was scared out of my mind. I never heard anything like it. It was new to me. So, yeah, I was really terrified," she told me as we talked in her mother's living room.

Her little girl had a lead level in her blood that was 11 times higher than the Centers for Disease Control currently considers the threshold level.

"I was really scared, especially when they told me what can happen. You know, she could have been brain damaged; she could have died. Anything. Even now she has to be monitored because these signs can come up later in her life," Jeffries said.

Some aspects of lead poisoning can be irreversible and last a lifetime.

Jeffries has been living with her mother in the downstairs apartment while the work to reduce lead exposure in her apartment has been going on. She says she's grateful to God and to the Clear Corps program for helping stop her daughter from being poisoned further.



"It's like a new start, making me feel safe," Jessica Jeffries said about the lead abatement project in her apartment.
Credit Lester Graham / Michigan Radio

"You know, it's like a new start, making me feel safe that I can go upstairs with my kids not having to worry about them picking up paint that's been peeling and things like that. I know that all the hazardous things are gone from up there and we're just looking forward to moving back upstairs," she said, smiling.

A lot of parents of kids who've been lead poisoned are like Jessica Jeffries. They just didn't know anything was wrong.

"Often times the symptoms of lead poisoning can be difficult to see and that's what makes testing lead through blood tests so critically important and to have it be done on a routine basis for kids," said Dr. Matthew Davis.

Dr. Davis is a Professor of Pediatrics and Internal Medicine at the University of Michigan. He's also the chief medical executive within the Michigan Department of Community Health.

Just over 10 years ago, more than 30% of Michigan kids who were tested for lead exceeded the current threshold used by the Centers for Disease Control. Today, less than 5% test above the threshold.

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Davis says they're working on that. He also says the state government is doing more about lead abatement in houses.

"Just last year, the state Legislature contributed more money toward the efforts for lead abatement. That is a critical step forward in terms of trying to do more in Michigan to try to

protect children from the hazards of lead poisoning. The governor's current budget also proposes that additional money for lead abatement," Davis said.

But that increased funding level means out of the many thousands of older homes in the state that are poisoning kids, only 160 will be fixed each year.



Before and after photos of a lead abatement project in Detroit.

Credit Courtesy Clear Corps

The return on each dollar used on lead abatement is massive.

Here's why:

- Lead poisoning can diminish IQ. That means kids won't meet their full potential in school or in the workforce, meaning lower incomes.
- Lead poisoning is associated with kids being more inattentive, hyperactive, disorganized, and having problems following directions.
- Lead poisoning is associated with behavioral problems, including bullying, fighting, vandalism, setting fires, and theft.

In fact, studies over the last few years found inmates with the highest lead-level exposure in childhood were among those who committed the most violent crimes.

Researchers are now theorizing the big drop in crime rates around the nation in the last couple of decades could be attributed in part to the phase-out of leaded gasoline, which was then the highest contributing factor to lead poisoning in children.

"There are very few public health interventions that offer that great combination of short term benefits that are measurable as well as long term gains."

If lead exposure to children is reduced to zero, schools might have fewer discipline problems, fewer students in more expensive special education, fewer days missed, and more

than likely less crime and fewer people in prison. In the end, the researchers say each dollar spent could mean anywhere between \$17 to \$50 in taxes saved.

“There are very few public health interventions that offer that great combination of short-term benefits that are measurable, as well as long-term gains,” Davis said.

In Detroit alone, there are tens of thousands of apartments and houses where there is still lead paint .

“Ninety-four percent of the houses in Detroit were built before the late 1970s and we presume that all those houses have lead,” said Mary Sue Schottenfels, the executive director at the non-profit Clear Corps.

The organization administers some of the lead abatement grants in the Detroit area. She says federal and state funding even at its highest has never been enough to tackle the problem in the way it should be.

“The massive amount of funding we would need has never been on the table and certainly now is not on the table because people do not think this is a serious issue,” Schottenfels said.

That sentiment is echoed in Lansing.

“I’ve been running this program for 20 years. I’m still amazed at how many people are unaware of lead hazards,” said Wesley Priem. He’s a section manager at the Michigan Department of Community Health, working on lead issues. He says since lead was taken out of gasoline and banned in paint, people just don’t seem to know or remember lead is still a problem.



The "alligatoring" pattern of the peeling paint is a tell-tale sign of lead paint.

Credit Lester Graham / Michigan Radio

“And so, the message has to go on being repeated and re-emphasized throughout our country about these dangers that are still lurking in our homes, but they have forgotten about them.”

And that includes reminding legislators of the problem. With term limits in place, there's always a crop of newbie legislators who have to be taught about lead poisoning.

Meanwhile, the problem persists and kids are damaged all across the state.

At the rate the state of Michigan is dealing with this toxin, we're going to continue to poison many more generations of our poorest children in their own homes.

This story comes from the State of Opportunity documentary "Growing Up in Poverty and Pollution," which airs on Michigan Radio tomorrow (Thursday) at 3 p.m. and again at 10 p.m. Support for State of Opportunity comes from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, a partner with communities where children come first.