
Lead Patient Information Sheet

This handout provides information and follow-up instructions for persons who have been exposed to lead.

What is lead?

Lead is a naturally occurring bluish-gray metal. It can combine with other chemicals to form lead compounds. Its main use is in the production of batteries, but it is also used in the production of ammunition, metal products, and ceramic glazes. Some chemicals containing lead are used in paint, but currently, the use of leaded paint is not allowed in residential structures due to the potential harmful effects in people and animals. Leaded paint used in residences built before 1978 is often a major source of lead exposure, especially for children.

What immediate health effects can be caused by exposure to lead?

Acute exposure to high amounts of lead produces abdominal pain, cramps, and vomiting. Brief exposures to low or moderate lead levels may not cause any specific symptoms, but continued exposure to lead may cause encephalopathy. Early symptoms of encephalopathy may develop within weeks of initial exposure and include dullness, irritability, poor attention span, headache, muscular tremor, loss of memory, and hallucinations. The condition may then worsen, sometimes abruptly, to delirium, convulsions, paralysis, coma, and death.

Can lead poisoning be treated?

There is no antidote for lead. Seriously exposed persons may need to be hospitalized and undergo chelation therapy to accelerate the excretion of lead from the body. Chelation therapy is necessary when blood lead levels are higher than 45 µg/dL.

Are any future health effects likely to occur?

Studies have shown that lead poisoning during infancy or childhood can result in diminished intellectual function and hypertension as adults.

What tests can be done if a person has been exposed to lead?

The most common test to determine exposure to lead is to measure lead in blood. Lead can also be measured in bone, teeth, hair, breast milk, and urine. In general, lead in blood is an index of recent exposure, whereas lead in bone reflects cumulative exposure throughout a lifetime. Lead affects some hematological indices in blood, which can also be measured to assess exposure to lead.

Where can more information about lead be found?

More information about lead can be obtained from your regional poison control center; your state, county, or local health department; the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR); your doctor, or a clinic in your area that specializes in occupational and environmental health. If the exposure happened at work, you may wish to discuss it with your employer, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), or the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). Ask the person who gave you this form for help in locating these telephone numbers.

Follow-up Instructions

Keep this page and take it with you to your next appointment. Follow *only* the instructions checked below.

Call your doctor or the Emergency Department if you develop any unusual signs or symptoms within the next 24 hours, especially:

- abdominal pain, nausea, constipation, or vomiting
- irritability, headache, loss of memory, or tremors
- incoordination, weakness, foot or wrist drop, stupor, or convulsions

No follow-up appointment is necessary unless you develop any of the symptoms listed above.

Call for an appointment with Dr. _____ in the practice of _____.
When you call for your appointment, please say that you were treated in the Emergency Department at _____ Hospital by _____ and were advised to be seen again in _____ days.

Return to the Emergency Department/_____ Clinic on (date) _____ at _____ AM/PM for a follow-up examination.

Do not perform vigorous physical activities for 1 to 2 days.

You may resume everyday activities including driving and operating machinery.

Do not return to work for ____ days.

You may return to work on a limited basis. See instructions below.

Avoid exposure to cigarette smoke for 72 hours; smoke may worsen the condition of your lungs.

Avoid drinking alcoholic beverages for at least 24 hours; alcohol may worsen injury to your stomach or have other effects.

Avoid taking the following medications: _____

You may continue taking the following medication(s) that your doctor(s) prescribed for you:

 Other instructions: _____

- Provide the Emergency Department with the name and the number of your primary care physician so that the ED can send him or her a record of your emergency department visit.

- You or your physician can get more information on the chemical by contacting: _____ or _____, or by checking out the following Internet Web sites: _____;

Signature of patient _____ Date _____

Signature of physician _____ Date _____