

# Childhood Lead Poisoning

Lead is a heavy metal found in the earth's crust that does not break down in the environment.<sup>1</sup> When someone inhales or swallows lead, they can suffer serious health consequences, up to and including death.<sup>2</sup>



In 2021, 91,648 of Georgia's children were screened for lead poisoning. Of those, **3,209 children** had **lead poisoning measuring 3.5 µg/dL or more.**<sup>3</sup>

## What is Childhood Lead Poisoning?

Georgia law requires, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends, intervention for children with a blood lead level presence of 3.5 µg/dL (micrograms per deciliter).<sup>4,5</sup> Children's bodies absorb lead more easily, affecting brain and other physical development in organs and the nervous system.<sup>6</sup> Children under age 6 are at the greatest risk of lead poisoning.<sup>7</sup> Even low levels of lead can result in:



Speech, language, and behavioral problems



Learning disabilities and Attention-Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder



Lower IQ



Nervous system damage

Higher levels of lead - also called elevated blood lead levels - can cause coma, convulsions, intellectual disabilities, developmental disabilities, seizures, and death. Elevated blood lead levels can require expensive medical treatment and exacerbate health conditions.<sup>8</sup> Prenatal exposure can cause miscarriage, premature birth, and damage to baby's brain, kidneys, and nervous system<sup>9</sup>

## DISPARITIES ON LEAD EXPOSURE

According to 2021 Georgia Department of Public Health data, childhood lead poisoning is more prevalent in Asian, Black, and Multiracial children than White children.<sup>10</sup>

## Where is Lead Found?



### Water

This can be caused by corrosion of plumbing materials (e.g. pipes and fixtures). Homes, schools, childcare programs, and other buildings built before 1986 are more likely to have lead pipes, fixtures and solder.<sup>11</sup>



### Soil

Yards and playgrounds may become contaminated from exterior lead-based paint flakes, industrial sources, or even contaminated sites. Also, lead is naturally occurring and can be found in high concentrations in some areas.<sup>14</sup>

### Paint

Older homes and buildings are more likely to have lead-based paint. While the use of lead in residential paints was banned in 1978, lead is present in many buildings built prior to that date.<sup>12</sup>



### Small metal objects

Which can be swallowed by children.<sup>15</sup>



### Herbal or folk remedies

Greta and azarcon, which are traditional Hispanic medicines, as well as other traditional medicines from India, China, Bhutan and others can contain lead.<sup>16</sup>



### Toys and Other Items

May be present in those imported from other countries.<sup>13</sup>

## PROTECT YOUR FAMILY



Have your child tested



Get your home checked for lead hazards



Test your water



Clean regularly



Remove shoes or wipe off soil before entering house

### Wins for Georgia's Kids

- In 2022, Georgia signed into law a lower lead poisoning threshold, which aligns with the most current CDC recommendation, of 3.5µg/dL.<sup>17, 18</sup> Additionally, this legislation supports the Georgia Department of Public Health 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. This program is funded by Environmental Protection Agency and free to participants.<sup>19</sup>

**There is still work to do.**

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Explore and establish funding opportunities to support ECE programs in lead pipe and fixture mitigation and remediation efforts.
- Expand Georgia law to include blood lead level monitoring and mitigation strategies for women of childbearing age (DPH) and children under six years of age.
- Develop and implement multi-year lead test and mitigation strategies in built environments and drinking water at schools, childcare facilities, and other non-home locations where children spend time.\* Explore federal and other public or private funding mechanisms to cover costs.
- Expand partnerships to increase blood lead level testing sites (e.g., clinics, labs, point of care) (DPH)
- Encourage Care Management Organizations (CMOs) to increase well-child visits and mandatory Medicaid child lead screenings.\*\* Ensure that Medicaid / DCH is accurately monitoring and reporting lead screening. (DCH)
- Assess and address built environment for each child whose blood lead level is equal to or greater than the CDC action level, especially for children under 3 years old (DPH, GEPD)

\*Lead testing and mitigation strategies for drinking water may consider the Georgia Lead Poisoning Prevention Act of 1994, which addresses lead-based paint.

\*\*Medicaid federally requires that every state provides at least 80% of Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic and Treatment recipients with timely medical screens, including lead screening for under age six.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> Note: Medicaid reported that this data was incorrectly reported so numbers will vary.<sup>22</sup>

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