



# Questions and Answers about Testing Your Home's Paint and Soil for Lead

*Contra Costa Health Services / Lead Poisoning Prevention Project*

## Why should I test my home for lead?

If you have children, lead in your home can cause serious long-term health and behavior problems for them. Lead is especially hazardous to children under 6 years of age. Children are vulnerable to lead in paint chips, dust and soil; it gets in their bodies when they put their fingers, toys or paint chips into their mouths. Lead can also harm a pregnant woman and her developing fetus.

### You should consider testing for lead if there are children in your home and . . .

- ◆ your home was built before 1978;
- ◆ your house is near a freeway or busy roadway where leaded gasoline and its exhaust may have polluted the soil with lead.

### If your house was built before 1978, it is especially important to test for lead if . . .

- ◆ A child living in the house has had a blood lead test result of 10 µg/dL (micrograms/deciliter) or higher;
- ◆ Your house has peeling or chipping paint;
- ◆ You plan to repaint, remodel or renovate the house;
- ◆ Your house was built before 1950 — such homes almost always have some lead-based paint;
- ◆ Your house has bare soil in the yard where children play.

### If you are buying or renting a home . . .

Federal law requires the seller or landlord to give you an informational pamphlet and to tell you about any known lead hazards in the home. (Federal law also gives home buyers 10 days to inspect for lead. The law does not require a landlord to allow a renter to inspect for lead.)

Contact the **National Lead Information Clearinghouse** at **1-800-424-LEAD** for information and materials about real estate disclosure laws and for the EPA pamphlet *Protect Your Family from Lead in Your Home*. Contra Costa residents can call **1-866-FIX-LEAD** for a copy of the booklet.

## Where should I test for lead?

The **most important** places to test for lead are those areas where children spend a lot of time, such as bedrooms, playrooms, the kitchen, and play-yards. It is especially important to test these areas if paint is peeling or chipping or if there is bare soil.

You should also test places where you plan to repaint or remodel. Test several different spots. If you are testing

paint, test each different paint color. Remember that older hazardous lead paint may be covered by more recent layers of lead-free paint. If you are testing soil, test different bare soil areas. Some good places to test are:

### PAINT

- ◆ window frames and sills
- ◆ doors, door jambs and thresholds
- ◆ baseboards
- ◆ kitchen cabinets
- ◆ exterior trim and siding
- ◆ painted children's furniture

### BARE SOIL

- ◆ around the foundation of the house
- ◆ under windows or walls with peeling or chipping paint
- ◆ where children play
- ◆ unpaved pathways
- ◆ places where pets play or rest

## How do I test for lead?

Whenever you test for lead, it is important to find out **how much** lead is in the paint or soil that you test. There are two recommended ways to test your home for lead.

### 1. Get a laboratory analysis

For \$25 to \$50, you can have a paint chip or soil sample tested by an accredited laboratory. Contra Costa residents can call **1-866-FIX-LEAD** for a list of accredited laboratories in Northern California, or visit [www.dhs.ca.gov/childlead](http://www.dhs.ca.gov/childlead). Ask the laboratory for specific instructions on collecting samples. Keep a sketch or list of the locations where you take the samples. Here are some general sample collection guidelines:

**Taking a Paint Sample:** Tape a clean plastic sandwich bag underneath some paint you want to test. Use a clean, sharp chisel or scraper to scrape a tablespoon-size amount of paint into the bag. Try to scrape off **all** the layers of paint, not just the top coats — lead is often in the bottom layers of paint. Try **not** to scrape off any of the wood or plaster that is under the paint. Seal the bag and label it. On the label, write where the sample was taken (example: "Sample #1 — kitchen window sill"). Wash your hands and the scraper with soap and water after **each** sample.

**Taking a Soil Sample:** Using a clean trowel or large spoon, scoop about half a cup of soil from the top inch of the bare soil you want to test. Try **not** to scoop up plant leaves, roots, or other large pieces of debris. If there are paint chips in the soil, it is OK to include them in the sample. Seal the bag and label it with the location where the sample was taken. Wash your hands and the spoon with soap and water after **each** sample you take.

## 2. Hire a Certified Inspector/Assessor:

You can hire an inspector/assessor certified by the State of California to inspect your home for lead. Get at least two or three bids for a cost estimate of the work. The cost will depend on whether the whole house or parts of it are tested, and whether soil testing is done. Ask the inspector/assessor to write you a risk assessment report that will tell you if the lead levels in your home are hazardous and what options you have to deal with it.

The certified inspector/assessor can test your paint with an XRF (x-ray fluorescence) machine for immediate results. He/she may also send paint, dust and soil samples to a laboratory for testing. Make sure the inspector/assessor gives you a sketch or a description of where paint and soil samples were taken.

For a list of State-certified inspector/assessors, call 1-800-597-LEAD or visit [www.dhs.ca.gov/childlead](http://www.dhs.ca.gov/childlead).

## How can I tell if I have hazardous levels of lead in my paint or soil?

The table below shows the levels of lead in paint, soil and dust considered hazardous by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA):

<b>Hazardous Levels of Lead</b>	
<b>Paint</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◆ Lab test results of 5,000 ppm (parts per million) or 0.5% or more (by weight)</li><li>◆ XRF test results of 1.0 milligrams of lead per square centimeter (1.0 mg/cm<sup>2</sup>) or more</li></ul>
<b>Bare Soil</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◆ Lab test results of 400 ppm or more in play areas</li><li>◆ Lab test results of 1,200 ppm or more (average) in bare soil in the rest of the yard</li></ul>
<b>Dust</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◆ Dust from floors with 40 micrograms of lead per square foot (40 mg/ft<sup>2</sup>) or more</li><li>◆ Dust from window sills with 250 micrograms of lead per square foot (250 mg/ft<sup>2</sup>) or more</li></ul>

## Can I use a kit from the hardware store to test for lead in paint?

**Yes, but sometimes these kits can be wrong.**

Lead test kits have chemicals that change color by reacting to lead. They are a quick and inexpensive method to test for lead in paint. But there are some problems with using test kits to test paint:

- ◆ These kits can only tell you **if** there is lead in the paint you tested. They will not tell you **how much** lead is in the paint or if it is a hazardous level.

- ◆ Test kits sometimes give a “no” answer when lead is really in the paint.
- ◆ Test kits sometimes give a “yes” answer when there is little or no lead in the paint.

If you decide to use a lead test kit to test your paint, follow the directions carefully. Be sure to test the bottom layers of paint. If your house was built before 1978 and your lead test kit comes out negative (does not change color), you should have an accredited lab test the paint to make sure the lead test kit worked properly.

**REMEMBER: Lead test results are only as good as your testing procedures. The results won't tell you about the lead content of painted surfaces or soil that you didn't test. Hire a certified inspector/assessor to make sure you get accurate testing results.**

### IMPORTANT

No matter what your test results are, the **condition** of your house's paint and soil is important. If you are not planning to remodel and the paint is in good condition — not peeling or chipping — it may not be a lead hazard, even if it contains lead. If the paint is peeling or chipping, or if it is on doors and windows where normal wear and tear causes chipping, or if you plan to remodel the area, you should take steps to prevent the lead from poisoning your children. If the soil is covered by grass, bushes or permanent ground coverings, even high levels of lead in the soil may not be hazardous to children.

## What should I do next?

If there are hazardous levels of lead in your paint or soil . . .

- ◆ Contact your family doctor and ask for blood lead tests for your children who are 6 years of age or under.
- ◆ If you plan to repaint or remodel your home, hire a State-certified lead-related construction contractor.
- ◆ If you plan to do the work yourself, contact the Contra Costa County Lead Poisoning Prevention Project (LPPP) at the phone number below to find out about safe work practices to prevent poisoning yourself or your children. The LPPP also has information about many other lead-related topics.



**Lead Poisoning  
Prevention Project**  
**1-866-FIX-LEAD**

(toll-free in Contra Costa County)

[www.cchealth.org/topics/lead\\_poison](http://www.cchealth.org/topics/lead_poison)