Childhood Lead Poisoning: A Preventable Disease

Why is exposure to lead harmful to young children? Lead disrupts the normal growth and development of a child's brain and central nervous system. According to the Centers for Disease Control, there is no safe level of lead exposure. If lead exposure happens at a critical time in brain development, the damage can be permanent. Young children are also more likely to be harmed by exposure to lead because the normal behavior of children (i.e., crawling on the floor, playing in dirt, putting objects in their mouths) puts them into immediate contact with any lead that might be present in their environment. Children are most at risk between the ages of six months and three years because they absorb more of the lead that gets into their lungs or stomach than adults or older children.

- **How does lead get into children?** Young children can get lead by:
    1. Swallowing lead dust that is picked on their hands, or toys or other objects that they put into their mouths;
    2. Swallowing lead paint chips;
    3. Breathing lead dust in the air; eating food or drinking water that has lead in it.

- **The biggest danger is the lead you can't see.** Most lead poisoning in children is due to their swallowing or breathing particles of very fine household dust or soil that has been contaminated with lead. This fine dust is very easily absorbed once it gets into the body.

- **What are the effects of lead poisoning in children?** Very high levels of lead can cause seizures, severe brain damage resulting in developmental disabilities, coma, and even death. Lower levels can cause stomach pains and anemia. Long term exposure to lead, even at relatively low levels; have been found to be associated with decreased hearing, lower intelligence, hyperactivity, attention deficits, and problems in school.

- **In 2015, there were more than 3,000 new cases of children under the age of six in New Jersey with elevated levels of lead in their blood**. Overall, about 225,000 young children in the state have been poisoned by lead since 2000.

- **This crisis continues. Eleven cities in New Jersey, and two counties, have a higher proportion of young children with dangerous lead levels than Flint, Mich.,** does, according to New Jersey and Michigan statistics. The communities with the high lead levels include Irvington, East Orange, Trenton, Newark, Paterson, Plainfield, Jersey City,

Elizabeth, Atlantic City, New Brunswick and Passaic, along with Salem and Cumberland counties.

Action Taken in NJ

- Governor Chris Christie on April 5, 2016 announced $10 million for lead remediation and containment in New Jersey, The dollars are for a program that will test and remove lead paint from low to moderate income homes. The Department of Community Affairs will oversee the program, and they'll partner with non-profits who already specialize in this kind of work. Christie said the state will spend up to $20,000 per housing unit.

- May 1, 2016 Governor Christie directed Acting Health Commissioner Cathleen Bennett to move forward with regulatory changes to strengthen New Jersey's standard for intervening in cases of potential lead exposure. New Jersey will join only about 25 percent of states in requiring earlier intervention when lower levels of lead are detected in a child -- from 10 micrograms per deciliter of blood to between 5 and 9 micrograms, as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control.

- May 1, 2016, Governor Christie require schools to test for lead in drinking water for the next school year, to publicly post all test results and immediately notify parents if testing shows elevated levels of lead. Schools also must provide parents with a description of any steps the school is taking to ensure safe drinking water will be made available to students.

- Testing of school water thus far has detected traces of lead higher than the Environmental Protection Agency's action level in several New Jersey schools, including some in the Newark, Bridgewater-Raritan, New Brunswick, West Windsor-Plainsboro, Princeton and Parsippany school districts, according to school officials.

Resources:

- *NJ Dept. of Health 2014 Annual Report* - http://www.state.nj.us/health/fhs/documents/childhoodlead2014.pdf
- *Flint, MI Water Crisis Page – January 8, 2016 Summary* http://www.michigan.gov/flintwater
- *NJ Spotlight December 1, 2015 Article* – http://www.njspotlight.com/stories/15/11/30/why-does-lead-poisoning-still-afflict-tens-of-thousands-of-kids-in-new-jersey/
- *US Census 2010*
- Atlantic County Division of Health Lead Factsheet: http://www.aclink.org/PublicHealth/health_topics/pdf_files/lead_poisoning_fact_sheet.pdf

For more information visit http://www.hcdnnj.org/lead