

Lead is a naturally occurring element found in small amounts in the earth's crust. While it has some beneficial uses, it can be toxic to humans and animals.¹ When lead is inhaled or swallowed, it can lead to serious health consequences as well as death.²

What is childhood lead exposure and poisoning?

Lead exposure occurs when a child comes in contact with lead by swallowing or breathing in lead or lead dust.⁸ After a child inhales or swallows lead, it quickly enters the blood stream. No safe blood level in children has been identified.

Lead poisoning is defined as 3.5 µg/dL (micrograms per deciliter).²

Children's bodies absorb lead more easily, affecting brain and other physical development in organs and the nervous system.⁴ Children under age 6 are at the greatest risk of lead poisoning.⁵ Even low levels of lead can result in:



Speech, language, and behavior problems



Learning disabilities and Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)



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.⁶ Prenatal exposure can cause miscarriage, premature birth, and damage to the baby's brain, kidneys, and nervous system.⁷

Lead Exposure and Georgia's Kids



In 2022, 88,852 of Georgia's children were screened for lead poisoning. Of those, **3,400 children** had **lead poisoning measuring 3.5 µg/dL or more.**³

Who is likely to be exposed to lead?

According to 2021 Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) data, childhood lead poisoning is more prevalent in Asian, Black, and Multiracial children than White children.¹³

Of Georgia's 159 counties, **16** were identified as locations where children living may have a higher risk of being exposed to lead: Bibb, Chatham, Clayton, Cobb, Colquitt, DeKalb, Dougherty, Floyd, Fulton, Gwinnett, Hall, Houston, Laurens, Muscogee, Richmond, and Troup.¹⁴

Progress for Georgia's Kids

In 2022, Georgia signed into law stronger protections for children who may be exposed to lead.^{10, 11} The legislation supports GaDPH 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. The program is funded by the Environmental Protection Agency and is free to participants.¹²

Where is lead found?



Water

Drinking water can be contaminated when it passes through older lead pipes, newer brass pipes, or copper pipes that are joined with lead solder.¹⁵



Paint

Older dwellings (those built prior to 1978) are more likely to contain lead-based paint. The use of lead in residential paints was banned in 1978.¹⁸



Soil

Lead-based exterior paint flakes can pollute yards, playgrounds, industrial sources, or other sites. Lead is naturally occurring and can be found in high concentrations in some areas.¹⁶



Herbal or folk remedies

Greta, azarcon, and other traditional medicines from India, China, Bhutan, and others can contain lead.¹⁹



Toys and Other Items

May be present in those imported from other countries.¹⁷



Small metal objects

Can be swallowed by children²⁰

Protecting Your Family from Lead Poisoning



Have your child tested



Get your home checked for lead hazards



Test your water



Clean regularly



Remove shoes or wipe off soil before entering the house

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)

*Consider leveraging the Georgia Lead Poisoning Prevention Act of 1994 to develop lead testing and mitigation strategies for drinking water.

**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.²¹ 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 0-6.²² Note: Medicaid reported that this data was incorrectly reported so numbers will vary.²³



References for Childhood Lead Poisoning

Suggested citation: Voices for Georgia's Children. (2023). Fact Sheet: Childhood Lead Poisoning. Voices for Georgia's Children. <https://adobe.ly/3Giqilv>.

- 1 United States Environmental Protection Agency. "Learn about Lead." Accessed October 9, 2023. <https://www.epa.gov/lead/learn-about-lead>.
- 2 United States Environmental Protection Agency. "Learn about Lead." Accessed October 9, 2023. <https://www.epa.gov/lead/learn-about-lead>.
- 3 Georgia Department of Public Health. "Number of children less than 6 years old screened for lead poisoning by county, Georgia, 2022, Source: GCLPPP Database." Accessed October 10, 2023. <https://dph.georgia.gov/document/document/env-health-lead-yearly-data-2022/download>.
- 4 Georgia Department of Public Health. "Healthy Homes and Lead Poisoning Prevention: Lead Frequently Asked Questions." Accessed October 9, 2023. <https://dph.georgia.gov/environmental-health/healthy-homes-and-lead-poisoning-prevention>.
- 5 Georgia Department of Public Health. "Healthy Homes and Lead Poisoning Prevention: Lead education and FAQs." Accessed October 27, 2022. <https://dph.georgia.gov/environmental-health/healthy-homes-and-lead-poisoning-prevention>.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention: Pregnant women." Accessed on October 27, 2022. <https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/prevention/pregnant.htm>.
- 8 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Blood Lead Levels in Children." Accessed October 9, 2023. <https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/docs/lead-levels-in-children-fact-sheet-508.pdf>.
- 9 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Blood lead reference value." Accessed November 1, 2022. <https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/data/blood-lead-reference-value.htm>.
- 10 Georgia General Assembly. House Bill 1355. Accessed October 27, 2022. <https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/legislation/document/20212022/212210>.
- 11 Georgia Department of Public Health. New Legislation Offers Stronger Protection for Georgia Children Exposed to Lead. Accessed October 27, 2022. [https://dph.georgia.gov/press-releases/2022-05-09/new-legislation-offers-stronger-protection-georgia-children-exposed-lead#:~:text=The%20new%20Georgia%20legislation%20lowers,Control%20and%20Prevention%20\(CDC\)](https://dph.georgia.gov/press-releases/2022-05-09/new-legislation-offers-stronger-protection-georgia-children-exposed-lead#:~:text=The%20new%20Georgia%20legislation%20lowers,Control%20and%20Prevention%20(CDC).).
- 12 RTI International. The Clean Water for Georgia's Kids Program. Accessed November 3, 2022. <https://www.cleanwaterforuskids.org/georgia>.
- 13 Georgia Department of Public Health. Professional Communication. 2022.
- 14 Georgia Department of Public Health. "Healthy Homes and Lead Poisoning Prevention: Lead Screening Children." Accessed October 9, 2023. <https://dph.georgia.gov/environmental-health/healthy-homes-and-lead-poisoning-prevention>
- 15 Georgia Department of Public Health. "Healthy Homes and Lead Poisoning Prevention: Lead Screening Children." Accessed October 9, 2023. <https://dph.georgia.gov/environmental-health/healthy-homes-and-lead-poisoning-prevention>.
- 16 United States Environmental Protection Agency. "Protect your family from sources of lead." Accessed October 27, 2022. <https://www.epa.gov/lead/protect-your-family-sources-lead>.
- 17 Mayo Clinic. "Lead poisoning." Accessed on October 27, 2022. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/lead-poisoning/symptoms-causes/syc-20354717>.
- 18 United States Environmental Protection Agency. "Protect your family from sources of lead." Accessed October 27, 2022. <https://www.epa.gov/lead/protect-your-family-sources-lead>.
- 19 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Lead in foods, cosmetics, and medicines." Accessed on October 27, 2022. <https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/prevention/sources/foods-cosmetics-medicines.htm>.



References for Childhood Lead Poisoning, p.2

- 20 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention: Sources of lead." Accessed on October 27, 2022. <https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/prevention/sources.htm>.
- 21 Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. "Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic, and Treatment." Accessed October 27, 2022. <https://www.medicaid.gov/medicaid/benefits/early-and-periodic-screening-diagnostic-and-treatment/index.html>.
- 22 National Health Law Program. "Children's Health Under Medicaid A National Review of Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic, and Treatment Services 2015 - 2019." Accessed October 27, 2022. <https://healthlaw.org/resource/childrens-health-under-medicaid-a-national-review-of-early-and-periodic-screening-diagnostic-and-treatment-services-2015-2019/>.
- 23 Georgia Health News. "State says technical 'reporting errors' caused data gap on kids' Medicaid referrals". October 27, 2022. <https://www.georgiahealthnews.com/2021/10/state-technical-reporting-errors-caused-data-gap-kids-medicaid-referrals/>.