News Release
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Over 5,000 Utah Children Potentially Poisoned by Lead

Experts estimate only 3% of Utah children are tested for lead, so actual number may be higher

SALT LAKE COUNTY—Salt Lake County and the Utah Lead Coalition announced today that the state’s 2016 lead poisoning rate was 2.1%. With an estimated 260,000 children under 5 in the state, that means there are potentially over 5,000 Utah children suffering from lead poisoning. Unfortunately, experts don’t really know how extensive the problem may be because only about 3% of children in Utah have been tested.

“More children in Utah need to be tested for lead,” says Dr. Claudia Fruin, chair of the Utah Lead Coalition, “both for their own protection and so we can better understand this problem.”

There are generally no symptoms associated with lead poisoning, so the only way to know if a child has an elevated level of lead in their blood is by doing a blood lead test. This may be done either by a blood draw from a vein at the same time as any other necessary blood tests, or by a simple finger prick specific for lead testing. Most insurance plans cover children’s blood lead testing, though the finger-prick test is inexpensive at around $8.

Unlike some states, Utah does not require blood lead testing, though it is a federal mandate that children on Medicaid be tested. But Utah Lead Coalition estimates that the Medicaid mandate is enforced less than 25% of the time.

“Lead poisoning in children is associated with lower IQ scores and behavior disabilities such as ADHD and aggression,” says Dr. Fruin. “These changes may be irreversible, so prevention and early detection are essential.”

Pregnant women are also at risk of passing on lead poisoning to their baby around 12 weeks of gestation or later. Lead may cause irreversible damage to the baby’s nervous system before the baby is born.

Treatment for lead poisoning includes identifying and removing any lead risk in the child’s environment, followed by optimizing the child’s diet and nutritional status to minimize lead absorption, then conducting follow-up testing to ensure the risks have been removed and the blood lead level is decreasing.

The most common source of lead poisoning in children is from old paint in homes built before 1978, but lead is also present in many other common products, including jewelry, tableware, charms, ammunition, fishing sinkers, stained glass, miniblinds, roofing, artificial turf and even toys produced in countries without strict safety guidelines.

“Ask your child’s pediatrician for blood lead testing,” says Dr. Fruin. “It’s easy, quick and inexpensive, and the benefits of knowing are huge.”

For more information about lead concerns in Salt Lake County, visit slco.org/lead-safe-housing.