

Fact Sheet: Lead in ceiling dust

Lead and your health

Historically, lead was widely used because it was cheap and its properties enhanced certain products.

Exposure to lead is linked with harmful effects on many organs and bodily functions. People of all ages may be harmed by lead but the risks are greatest for pregnant women, infants and children. Factors which influence the symptoms and health effects include the age and health status of the person, the amount of lead, and the duration of exposure.

It is well established that elevated blood lead levels can have harmful effects including anaemia, kidney problems and neurological or developmental effects, particularly in children.

If you suspect that you or your family have been exposed to lead, visit your doctor for further advice. For more information regarding the health effects of lead please refer to the NHMRC Statement and Information Paper on the Health Effects of Lead at www.nhmrc.gov.au/health-topics/lead-blood-levels.

Which homes are most at risk?

Many older Australian homes and buildings have lead dust in their ceiling cavities, wall cavities, and under the floor. This dust has built up over many years and may be from multiple sources such as home renovations, nearby industrial pollution, pre-2002 car exhaust fallout, and fumes from burning wood or coal. The breakdown of old lead paint maybe a source of dust in older homes (pre-1970).

How lead dust can contaminate your house

The dust in your roof space does not pose a risk if ceilings, cornices and ceiling roses are in good repair. In fact, the dust is better left untouched if there are no leakages into living spaces.

The following home maintenance or renovation activities may disturb dust and increase the risk of lead contaminating your living areas:

- demolishing ceilings or cavity walls
- adding a second-story extension
- putting in an attic ladder or skylight
- installing insulation or new electrical wiring
- working in the ceiling cavity for any reason.

Prevent lead hazards from ceiling dust



Note: black trails of dust near cracks or cornices are warning signs. Decorative ceiling roses with air vents can also let dust into rooms. Water damage may cause ceilings to crack or collapse.

What to do

- Before you renovate or do maintenance work in your home find out where the sources of lead could be and how to deal with them safely.
- Pregnant women, children and pets should move out until the clean-up is finished or stay away from the work area.
- Before demolishing or working in the ceiling, have ceiling and wall cavity dust professionally vacuumed with a HEPA vacuum cleaner.
- Do-it-yourself ceiling dust removal is not recommended – it's dirty and dangerous and requires special equipment.
- Take precautions to ensure dust does not enter living areas through the access hole into the ceiling. Wear an AS-I716-approved respirator fitted with P1 (dust) or P2 (dust and fumes) filter. Follow manufacturer's instructions to ensure the mask fits properly. Simple paper masks offer limited protection against very fine lead-contaminated dust due to poor facial fit.
- Wear protective clothing (long sleeves and pants) that does not catch dust or flakes in pockets or cuffs. Disposable coveralls and plastic boot covers are recommended.
- Lay plastic under the access hole and cover or move soft furnishings, carpets, curtains, etc. in the room.

- Wash hands and face before meals, and shower and change clothes when you finish work. If you smoke, don't smoke or carry cigarettes in the work area, and wash hands before smoking.
- Wash work clothes separately from all other clothes using a phosphate detergent (e.g. liquid sugar soap). Rinse the washing machine afterwards.
- After you've finished, do not sweep or use your domestic vacuum cleaner. Wet-wash the entire work area and all hard surfaces. Wipe any furniture and window sills, skirting boards and picture rails with a damp cloth and a high-phosphate detergent (e.g. liquid sugar soap).
- Seal the collected dust in heavy-duty plastic bags.
- Dispose of the bags at an approved waste facility (call the NSW Environment Protection Authority or your local council for details).

Potential sources and locations of lead dust



Where to get advice

For information on lead and the environment call the NSW EPA's Environment Line on 131 555 or visit the NSW EPA lead safety webpage: www.epa.nsw.gov.au/lead.

For further information and advice about protecting yourself from lead, testing for lead and removal services and guidelines for safe home renovation, call The LEAD Group on 1800 626 026 or (02) 9716 0014. Lead test kits are available from the Lead Group (www.leadsafeworld.com/shop) and most hardware stores.

Ask your doctor for information about blood tests and the effects of lead on your health.

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Every effort has been made to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of publication. However, as appropriate, readers should obtain independent advice before making any decision based on this information.

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