

Toy Recalls and Lead Poisoning

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*This article was originally published in the Lamorinda Moms Club Newsletter

All of you are aware by now, of the major toy recalls from top toy giants Fisher Price/Mattel and RC2 Corporation, the makers of The Thomas and Friends railway line. Nearly one million toys have been recalled over the last three summer months. This massive recall has again brought up the subject of lead poisoning, so I am going to cover the important take home information.

What is Lead poisoning? Lead poisoning or lead intoxication occurs when the lead level in the bloodstream is greater than 10 micrograms per deciliter (mcg/dl). Lead levels around 10 mcg/dl rarely cause any outward physical signs. Symptoms tend to be more subtle, and result in problems with brain development, i.e. growth problems, hearing loss and learning disabilities. Physical symptoms, such as bad stomach pain, nausea, decreased appetite and energy levels, and sometimes seizures, rarely occur below levels of 40-60 micrograms per deciliter. It is to catch these concerning changes in brain development, which mandated the American Academy of Pediatrics to screen for elevated lead levels. Current standards call for targeted lead screening of at risk children. These are typically children from lower income populations and minority communities, which tend to have a higher incidence of lead poisoning. Despite this, nearly 1 million children in the US per year have elevated lead levels and nearly 300,000 a year suffer from lead poisoning.

How can lead levels be checked? Checking your lead level requires a simple blood test. There are two ways to check lead levels. The blood can be obtained by a finger stick, which checks capillary blood, or by a venous stick, which requires that blood be drawn from a vein. Venous sticks tend to be more reliable and if a finger stick is abnormal, the venous stick will need to be done, necessitating two separate pokes. The results are typically available in 1-3 days from most local laboratories.

What does this have to do with my child's toys? Mattel's products were recalled because they were found to have decorative paint with elevated lead levels. In the United States, paint cannot contain a lead content higher than 0.06%, yet these standards are not maintained all over the world. In fact, in China, where most of these toys are manufactured, the laws are much less stringent. The Consumer Product Safety Commission is responsible for maintaining safe products in the US. They oversee this project, and toy model names and numbers can be verified on their website at <http://www.cpsc.gov>, or by checking the Mattel website at <http://www.mattel.com>.

Who is at risk for lead poisoning? Children between the ages of 6 months and 6 years, especially those 6 months-3 years old, are most at risk for lead poisoning because everything they touch and explore goes in their mouth. This mouthing behavior means that many unsafe and toxic products can be ingested. If your home or child care center was built before 1950, the chances of the presence of lead dust and or peeling paint with high lead content is quite high. If your home or apartment building was built before 1978, and is being renovated, there is also a risk of exposure to elevated lead levels. It was in 1978, that the US strengthened its' lead laws. Before that year, paint was much less safe than it is now. Children can easily pick up lead dust, which tends to settle in windowpanes and doorways, and are not uncommonly putting dirt in their mouths, which can contain lead as well. In addition, for those have lived in other countries and used glazed pottery for cooking or drinking, many of the glazes contain elevated levels of lead, which can seep into the food or drink, served in the pottery.

Should I get my child's lead level checked? If you have any of the aforementioned risk factors in your home or child care setting, your child should be tested for elevated lead levels. If your child owned any of the recalled

toys, send them back as instructed, but check them for excessive chewing and or flaking of paint. If the paint appears to be chewed or worn off, discuss with your pediatrician lead screening.

How can I protect my child from exposure to lead? Wash your child's hands regularly, especially prior to eating. Feed your child a small snack or meal prior to playtime, as lead is better absorbed on an empty stomach. Discourage your child from eating soil or chipped paint. Clean up dusty areas with a HEPA (high particulate) filter vacuum, and ensure that your child's sleeping area or playroom is free from peeling or chipped paint. Ensure your child has a diet rich in calcium and iron, because children with deficits in iron and calcium will tend to absorb lead more readily into their system. Finally, lead testing kits can be obtained from your local hardware store. These kits identify the presence of lead in products that you use. They often vary in effectiveness, and do not provide how much lead is present.

American Academy of Pediatrics: www.aap.org