

Officials issue lead warning

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Todd Decker didn't think anything of scraping paint off a 100-year-old house without a mask covering his nose and mouth.

In Galveston's sweltering summer heat, masks and long-sleeve shirts are uncomfortable, Decker said.

He didn't know the paint dust and scrapings that covered his arms and fell into his face were filled with lead, an environmental toxin that causes neurological damage and, in severe cases, death.

A month later, after a doctor recommended a lead test, Decker was checking into a hospital with a blood lead level of 122, three times the amount considered dangerous in adults.

As hundreds of contractors and homeowners start working to repair houses damaged by Hurricane Ike, officials with the Galveston County Health District warn doctors are likely to start seeing more cases of lead poisoning if people don't protect themselves.

Contractors Vulnerable

Lead poisoning is most common in children. Even small amounts of the toxin can cause irreversible brain damage, although its victims show almost no symptoms.

Children can come into contact with lead in toys, cheap pottery and traditional health treatments from Mexico and South America, but the most common source is lead-based paint, which was not banned in the United States until the 1970s.

Two-thirds of Galveston houses were built before then. Even houses that had been remodeled before Ike might still have traces of the toxic paint hidden in areas that won't be uncovered until remediation and rebuilding begins.

While children are still the most vulnerable to lead poisoning, contractors or homeowners doing the work themselves could now be more likely to come into contact with the toxin.

When working on flood-damaged houses, no one should use a belt sander, propane torch, high temperature heat gun, dry scraper or dry sandpaper to remove lead-based paint, according to a statement released by the health district.

Workers who don't know whether they might come into contact with the toxic paint should wear a mask and clothing that covers their arms and legs at all times.

'Amazed I Was Alive'

Decker, 41, who still works as a contractor and handyman six months after his bout with lead, now tells everyone he knows to take the threat seriously.

He survived without any ill effects, but others might not be so lucky, he said.

The doctors and nurses who treated Decker at three different hospitals, including the University of Texas Medical Branch, told him they had never seen lead levels as high as his, he said.

"They told me they were amazed I was alive, let alone walking around," he said.

Like many children who get lead poisoning, Decker showed almost no symptoms. He went to the doctor for a regular checkup and because he was having minor chest pains, his doctor asked him what he had been doing lately.

When the doctor heard about the remodeling work, he recommended a lead test.

Island contamination

Because of its high concentration of older homes, Galveston has one of the highest rates in the country of lead poisoning in children.

A Baylor College of Medicine report released in 2007 revealed about 20 percent of Galveston children tested for lead had elevated levels of the environmental toxin in their blood.

In 2008, 17 of the county's 24 lead poisoning cases were reported in Galveston.

The best way to prevent lead poisoning is to have a house tested by a certified lead inspector or risk assessor before starting to make repairs.

Taking Precautions

Families, especially those with small children or pregnant women, should not live in a house while it is being repaired

After the work is done, children can still be poisoned by paint dust left in a house, health district officials say. All floors, windows, window sills and other flat surfaces should be mopped or wiped down with a wet cloth weekly to reduce the risk of children coming into contact with any lead-laced dust.

People working on a house that might have lead-based paint should shower and change their work clothes before coming home or wear protective clothing that can be thrown away at the end of the day.

Anyone who is worried about poisoning should request a lead test, just in case, said Mark Guidry, head of the health district.

Thankful

Although lead poisoning is irreversible, doctors can lower blood lead levels to prevent continued exposure.

Decker took chelation therapy for a month after his diagnosis. He was uninsured, but Ovation Pharmaceuticals provided the treatment free.

Six months later, he has a blood lead level of 33 and a much healthier respect for the dangers of scraping paint.

"I'm just very thankful," he said.

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