

Lead Paint in Your Home



**A Guide to Safe Maintenance
of Older Homes**



LEAD POISONING

Parents of young children share a familiar, nagging concern about lead exposure. Lead is an insidious poison that is commonly found in most homes that were built before 1978, when the federal government banned the sale of lead-based paint for residential use. Despite prevention efforts, lead poisoning still affects hundreds of thousands of children every year.

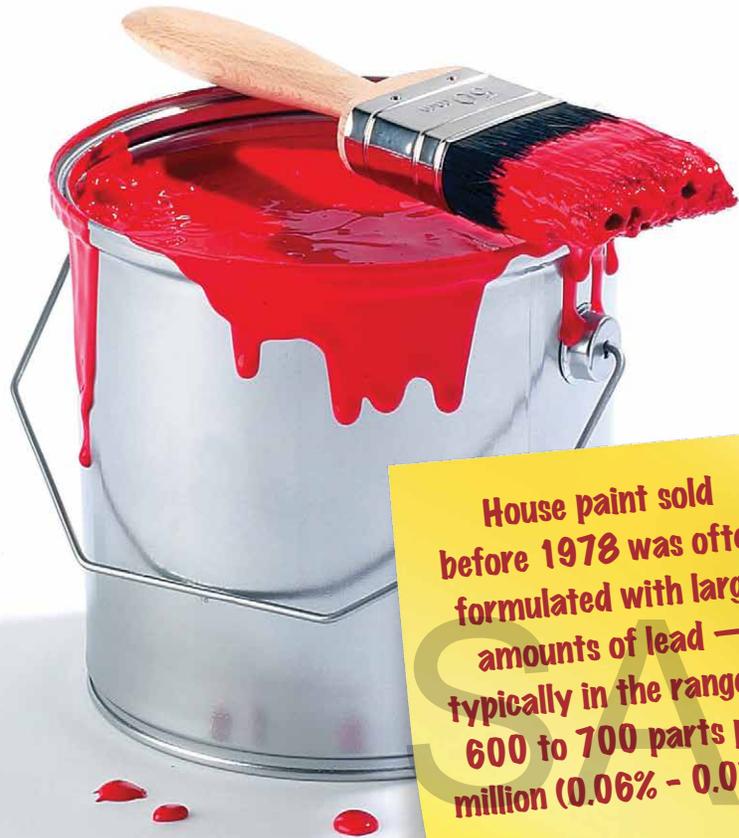
Lead is notorious for the irreversible damage it can cause to a child's developing nervous system. Ingesting even a small amount can be harmful. Childhood exposure to lead dust has detrimental impacts on learning, attention, IQ, and academic performance. It has also been strongly linked to behavioral disorders affecting impulse control and social conduct. Ingesting higher amounts of lead can cause more serious damage to the kidneys and the nervous system. Lead accumulates in bones and tissues over time and can cause additional health problems later in life. It can also cause problems in adults, impairing fertility and pregnancy. In older adults, accumulated lead in bones is linked to a higher risk of dementia, cognitive degeneration, and other types of neurological effects that can occur over time as bone tissue breaks down and releases stored lead into the bloodstream. As with other heavy metals, exposure to lead is also linked to cardiovascular and kidney disease.

Where **LEAD** Lurks in Your Home

and What It Means for Your Health

Lead is a stealth poison. It accumulates in the body through normal daily activities of eating, breathing, and living in an old house. Tiny particles of lead paint flake off walls, doorways, and window jambs; contaminate the dust in your home; and can easily be inhaled or stick to crawling babies' hands. Lead paint chips can also be tracked inside when you walk across an old painted porch or through soil contaminated by deteriorating siding.





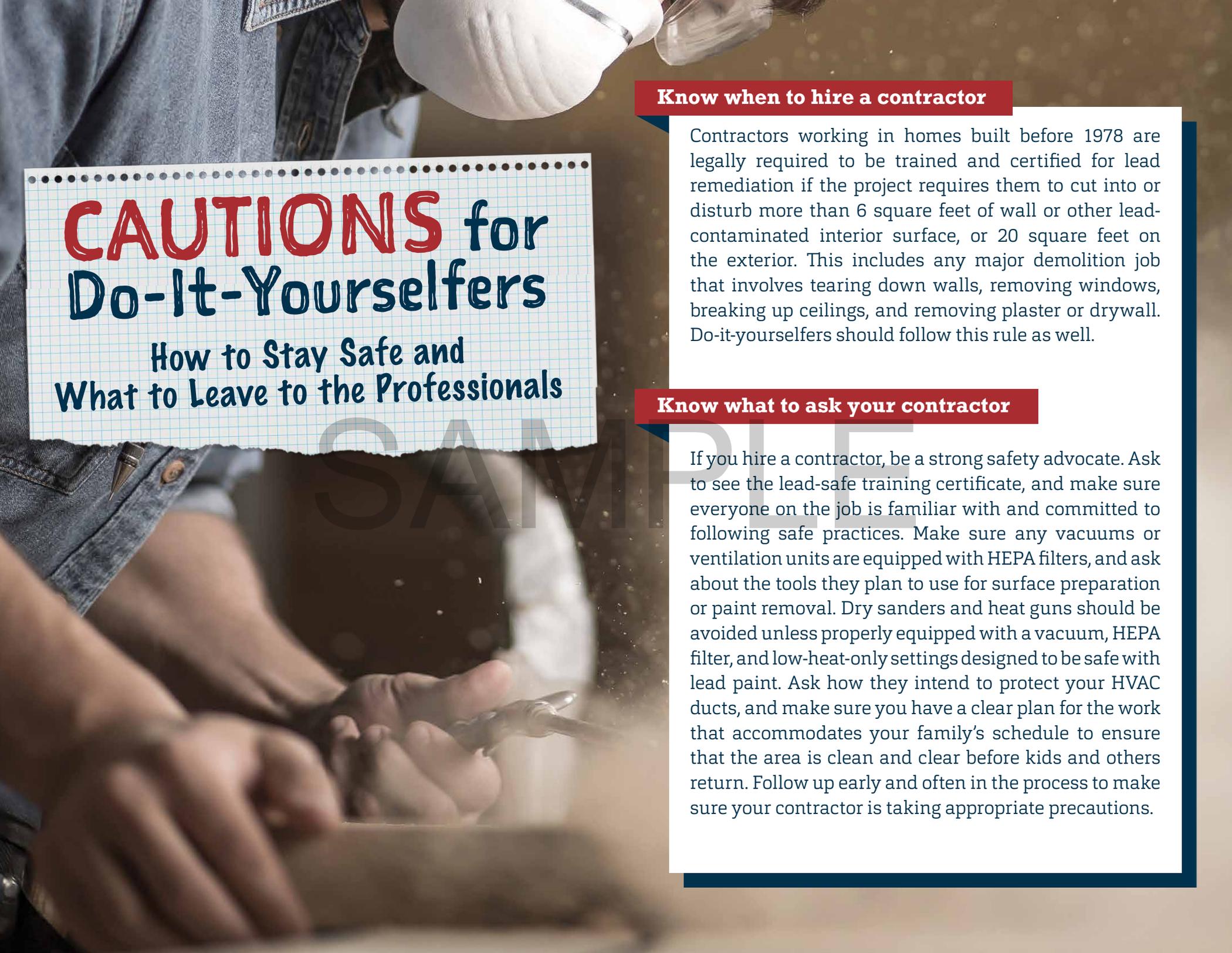
House paint sold before 1978 was often formulated with large amounts of lead — typically in the range of 600 to 700 parts per million (0.06% - 0.07%).

Avoiding exposure to lead paint dust and contaminated household dust is much more difficult than you might expect. Young children are most vulnerable, both because of their small size and because they spend so much time on or near the floor, putting everything—including dusty hands and toys—in their mouths. Loose paint chips are tempting for kids to peel off and eat, and this behavior may actually be encouraged by the paint's sweet flavor. Less noticeable lead-laden dust gets into the mouth indirectly, as it sticks to hands and toys. Much smaller amounts may also be inhaled.

Therefore, it's important to take steps to keep old houses especially clean and do as much as possible to maintain painted surfaces and minimize dust. Even when tackling small home improvement projects, take steps to clear surface dust quickly and thoroughly. It can be relatively easy to keep your family safe if you take simple steps to prepare for the task.

No amount of lead exposure is completely safe, so accidentally ingesting even a tiny amount of contaminated dust poses some risk for young children. Poisoning from incidental contact with contaminated household dust is commonly a gradual process. Poisoning can happen more quickly when maintenance or renovation projects disturb the paint surface, such as dry scraping or sanding, without taking proper precautions to contain the dust.





CAUTIONS for Do-It-Yourselfers

How to Stay Safe and
What to Leave to the Professionals

Know when to hire a contractor

Contractors working in homes built before 1978 are legally required to be trained and certified for lead remediation if the project requires them to cut into or disturb more than 6 square feet of wall or other lead-contaminated interior surface, or 20 square feet on the exterior. This includes any major demolition job that involves tearing down walls, removing windows, breaking up ceilings, and removing plaster or drywall. Do-it-yourselfers should follow this rule as well.

Know what to ask your contractor

If you hire a contractor, be a strong safety advocate. Ask to see the lead-safe training certificate, and make sure everyone on the job is familiar with and committed to following safe practices. Make sure any vacuums or ventilation units are equipped with HEPA filters, and ask about the tools they plan to use for surface preparation or paint removal. Dry sanders and heat guns should be avoided unless properly equipped with a vacuum, HEPA filter, and low-heat-only settings designed to be safe with lead paint. Ask how they intend to protect your HVAC ducts, and make sure you have a clear plan for the work that accommodates your family's schedule to ensure that the area is clean and clear before kids and others return. Follow up early and often in the process to make sure your contractor is taking appropriate precautions.

Know when you can do it yourself

If you have basic home repair skills, you are probably well equipped to install screws or nails to secure art, shelving, or furniture to walls; to patch cracks or holes in plaster or drywall; to prep walls and woodwork for painting; or to replace molding, windows, or doors. But considering that there's more than enough lead in a fingernail-sized paint chip to poison a young child (even if it's covered in layers of latex paint), it pays to take proper precautions for even small jobs.

The main factors in determining which projects you can safely do yourself:

- What is the size of the lead-painted surface that must be disturbed to complete your project?
- Does your ability match the skill required to do the work?
- Can you reasonably expect to contain the dust and minimize exposure, especially for young children?

Before you do anything, know what not to do

Don't assume removing all the lead paint is the best solution.

- The most important goal is to prevent lead paint from chipping or creating dust. On flat walls, this is often best accomplished by repairing chipped or cracked areas, then properly prepping, priming, and painting the wall with a solid finish. If the surface is too badly damaged to repair, you may be able to avoid demolition by patching the damage and encasing it with a layer of sheetrock or paneling.
- High-impact items such as doors, windows, stairs, moldings, and old painted furniture pose the greatest risk and are often best handled by replacing them completely, or having paint stripped at a professional wood-restoration facility.
- Whatever the condition, lead-painted items and materials must be treated with utmost care to minimize and contain dust and particles as much as possible.

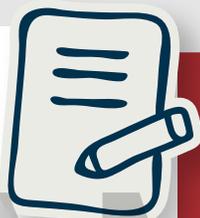
Don't use regular paint-stripping techniques.

- Never dry sand or scrape lead paint. Instead, mist the surface heavily with water to keep dust particles out of the air. Avoid power tools that aren't equipped with HEPA vacuum features specially designed to contain lead paint.
- Never strip lead paint with high-heat paint-stripping guns, which can create lead fumes that are even more readily inhaled and just as toxic.

TIPS for Doing It Right

1. Assess the Situation

- **Assume it's lead paint.** In older homes, it's best to just assume that lead is present somewhere. Remember, it still poses a hazard, even if it's under several layers of latex paint. Properly used, home test kits can confirm your suspicions, but you can't be sure your old home is lead-free without a more comprehensive professional inspection using sophisticated, highly sensitive analytical devices.
- **Make sure you have the skills to do it safely.** Do a reality check to make sure you have the skills and time needed to do the job safely. Seriously consider calling the pros if there's any question about the scale or know-how needed to do the work. If you are planning to do a lot of projects, consider taking a certification course for lead-safe work practices. The training is affordable and readily available, often through local health departments, vocational schools, or a local cooperative extension service.



- **Make sure you have the right materials and equipment to protect everyone involved.** Even for the smallest jobs, make sure to stock your toolkit with spray bottles, heavy plastic sheeting, duct tape, disposable cloths, and cleaning products, so you can clean thoroughly as you go and keep dust from tracking beyond the work zone.

For more information, see
www.epa.gov/lead.

Free home improvement
guidance is also available
from the U.S. Department
of Housing and Urban
Development in **Lead
Paint Safety: A Field
Guide for Painting,
Home Maintenance and
Renovation Work.**

www.hud.gov



2. Plan Ahead

- **Schedule** enough time for doing the job and keeping children and other vulnerable family members (including pets) out of harm's way during the project.
- **Secure** the dirty zone with a well-taped plastic tarp, and contain the area to ensure that dust isn't tracked into other parts of the house. Cover air-intake vents and heating or cooling ducts. Gloves and a disposable respirator are also important, along with long sleeves, long pants, socks, and shoes.
- **Explain** to everyone in the household what work is being done and why it's important to stay clear of the area until the work is finished.



When choosing a respirator, make sure it's a half mask type NIOSH rated N100, with metal nose bridge and HEPA filter.



3. Contain

The goal is to minimize and contain all lead dust and paint chips. Make sure to remove toys and food items from the room, and cover furniture and anything that remains in the space. Set up measures to prevent dust and debris on your shoes and clothing from contaminating areas outside the work zone.



4. Clean, Clean, Clean

- **Keep the family, especially vulnerable kids and pregnant women, away from the space until work is completed** and the area is thoroughly cleaned.
- **Don't forget to promptly change clothes and wash work clothing** separately from other items when you are done. Remember, dust can easily spread from clothing to others with a simple hug or handshake.
- **Use a good detergent** in mist bottles to spray down the dust before cleaning. When cleaning hard surfaces, **use the two-bucket method**, with clean rinse water on one side and detergent on the other. Thoroughly rinse mops, rags, and sponges in the rinse water first before dipping in the detergent. **Scrub surfaces well** and finish with a clean wet sponge. Fold up dusty plastic sheeting with dirty sides together, and **place everything in strong garbage bags that are well sealed** and contained. Make sure vacuum cleaners are equipped with a new **HEPA filter**, and vacuum under and around all furniture slowly and thoroughly.



5. Follow Up

- To **check that the cleanup has been thorough**, use a home-test kit to swab surfaces around the work area.
- **Keep surfaces well maintained** and follow a regular inspection schedule to make sure lead-painted surfaces remain intact.
- **Keep up to date with blood lead tests for your kids.** Most states require kids to be screened for blood lead poisoning at two years old and before starting kindergarten.
- **Keep good records of your work.** Lead remediation is often a significant factor when buying or selling a house.



Resources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
www.cdc.gov/lead
- National Center for Healthy Housing
www.nchh.org
- National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, National Institutes of Health
www.niehs.nih.gov/health/topics/agents/lead
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
www.HUD.gov

www.educationandoutreach.com

Notice: This booklet was produced by The Education & Outreach Company. Neither The Education & Outreach Company nor any person acting on behalf of The Education & Outreach Company makes any warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the use of any information disclosed in this booklet, or assumes any liability with respect to the use of, or for damages resulting from the use of, any information contained in this booklet. The recommendations, statistics, and information provided are strictly for the purposes of informing the user.

© 2026 The Education & Outreach Company. All rights reserved.