

# Lead and Your Health

**New!!** For more information, see **Workplace Hazard Alert – New Health Dangers from Lead** at [www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/olppp/Documents/LeadHazAlert.pdf](http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/olppp/Documents/LeadHazAlert.pdf) and **Alerta - Nuevos Peligros del Plomo** at [www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/olppp/Documents/LeadHazAlertSpan.pdf](http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/olppp/Documents/LeadHazAlertSpan.pdf)

Lead serves no useful purpose in the body and it can cause serious and permanent health problems.

## How Does Lead Enter the Body?



Lead enters the body by being inhaled or swallowed. Lead can be inhaled when lead dust, mist, or fumes (“smoke”) are in the air. Particles of lead can be swallowed if lead gets on a worker’s hands, clothing, or face. Lead can also be swallowed if food, beverages, cigarettes, or tobacco products become contaminated with lead. If contaminated cigarettes are smoked, lead can be both inhaled and swallowed.

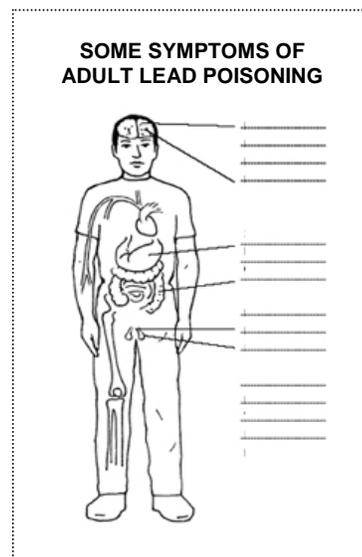
After being inhaled or swallowed, lead is absorbed into the bloodstream and then circulates throughout the body. About half of the lead that is absorbed is eliminated right away by the kidneys into the urine. The lead that is not eliminated is stored in the body. Most of this lead accumulates in the bones and may stay there for years. Lead in bone is gradually released back into the bloodstream over time. Because lead is stored in the bones, exposure to even small amounts of lead over a long period of time can be harmful.

## What Health Problems Can Lead Cause?

Lead affects many important body systems. Lead damages the brain, nerves, red blood cells, kidneys, and reproductive systems of men and women. Lead easily crosses the placenta in a pregnant woman and can harm the fetus. Lead can also cause high blood pressure, miscarriage, and other serious health problems. **Damage from lead exposure can be permanent.**

The signs and symptoms of lead poisoning are often vague and can easily be confused with symptoms of other conditions. The blood lead level at which symptoms occur varies greatly from person to person. **Some people are poisoned by lead yet have few or no obvious symptoms.**

See [Page 3](#) for factsheet:



## How Can I Find Out If There Is Lead In My Body?

The best way to know if there is lead in your body is to have a blood lead test. A blood lead test will tell you whether you have been recently exposed to lead either by breathing or swallowing it. If you work with or around lead, you should be tested periodically for lead.

A blood lead test must be ordered by a doctor. If you think you may be exposed to lead, ask your doctor to do a blood lead test. If you work with lead, your employer may be required to offer this testing.

## How Can Lead Poisoning Be Treated?

The main treatment for lead poisoning is to remove the person from lead exposure to allow the body to clear the lead. In cases where a worker has a dangerously high level of lead in his or her body, the employer is required to transfer that worker to another job where s/he won't be exposed to lead, or to take him or her off the job. The worker must stay away from lead work until his or her blood lead level comes down. This is called Medical Removal Protection, and is initiated by the doctor. Workers who are on Medical Removal Protection receive their full salary and benefits, and can only return to their regular job if their doctor approves.

In rare cases, adults with very high blood lead levels and serious symptoms may need treatment with a drug to help lower the lead in the body. This is called "chelation therapy." Only a licensed doctor with experience treating adult lead poisoning should make decisions regarding chelation for an individual worker.

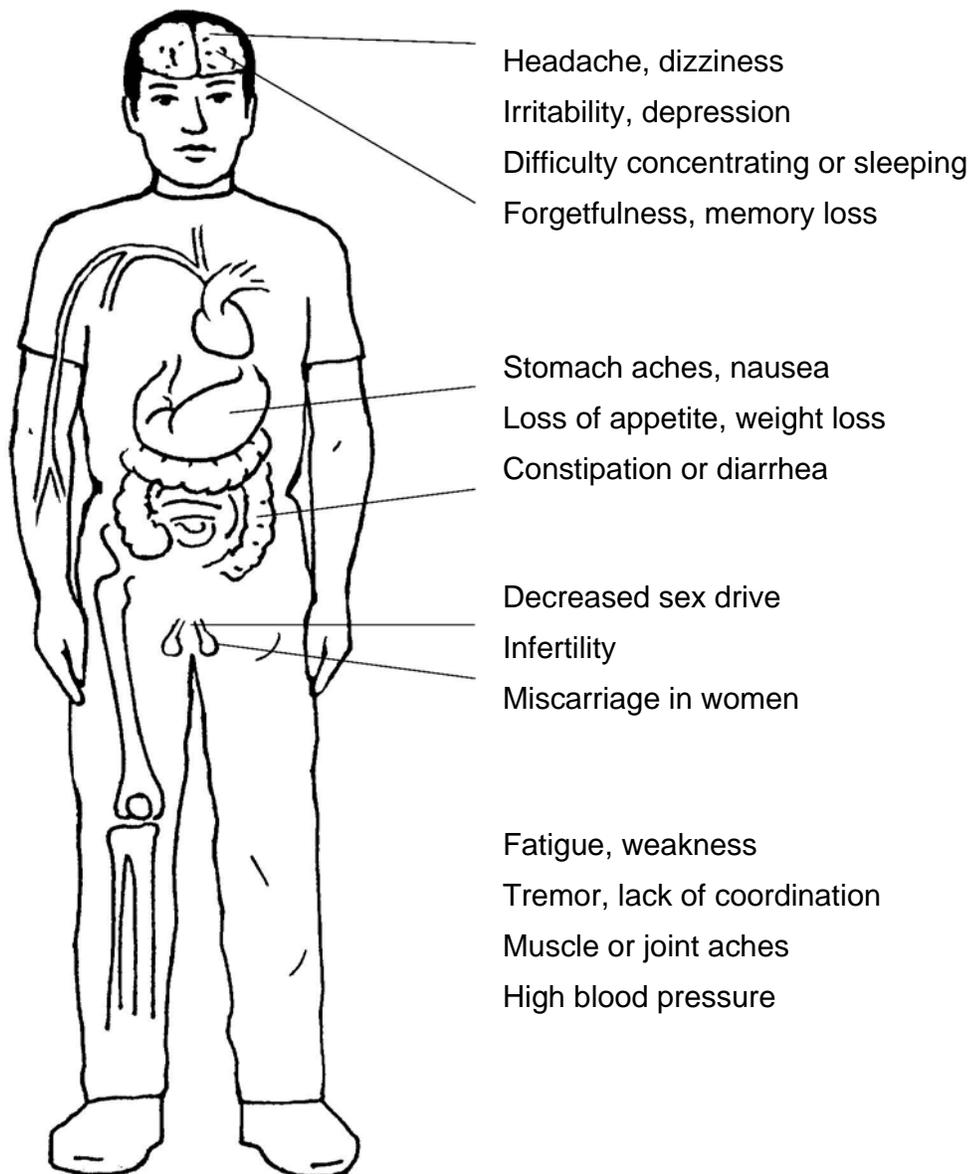
## Don't Bring Lead Home!

Lead brought home from work on your clothes and shoes can expose your family to dangerous levels of lead. This "take-home" lead can harm children or other adults in your home. If you think that you may have brought lead home, your family and others who live in your house should also have their blood checked for lead. If you need help getting a blood lead test for a family member, contact your local Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program (For a list of local programs, go to <http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/clppb>).

For more information about "take-home" lead, see our brochure "Don't Take Lead home From Your Job!" in **English** (<http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/OLPPP/documents/takehome.pdf>) or **Spanish** (<http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/OLPPP/documents/takehomeesp.pdf>).

For more information about lead in the workplace, visit the **Occupational Lead Poisoning Prevention Program** Home Page: <http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/OLPPP/>.

## SOME SYMPTOMS OF ADULT LEAD POISONING



*Note: This is not a comprehensive list of symptoms. A physician with experience caring for lead-exposed workers must determine if an employee's symptoms are related to lead exposure.*