

COMMENT

Lead poisoning a threat to the health of our kids

A silent epidemic is impairing the mental development of American children. The Centers for Disease Control calls it "the most common and societally devastating environmental disease of young children."

The problem is childhood lead poisoning, and the statistics are overwhelming:

▶ 3 million young children — one out of six — have blood lead levels high enough to impair mental development.

▶ In some cities, half the young children have been exposed to enough lead to cause irreversible brain damage.

▶ In one out of 10 pregnancies, the normal development of the fetus is jeopardized by maternal lead exposure.

Yet few of us are aware of the profound risks to our children. The damage caused by lead poisoning is tragic and irreversible. Compared to their peers, lead-poisoned children have lower IQs, shorter attention spans and much higher school dropout rates. The economic costs of lead poisoning — measured just in terms of medical expenses and lost earnings — exceed \$100 billion.

It doesn't have to be this way. Childhood poisoning is caused primarily by exposure to old lead paint, lead-bearing soils and lead in drinking water. These exposures are preventable.

Most homes built before 1980 contain lead paint, which is the most common cause of lead poisoning. As this old paint deteriorates or is disturbed during renovations, it sheds toxic lead dust. Toddlers are poisoned when they swallow the dust.

Families could protect themselves from lead paint, but most are unaware of the risks involved. To change this, families need to be told of the dangers they face before they move into a home. And they need a program to license workers to abate lead hazards safely. Currently, only one state, Massachusetts, provides these simple protections.

A similar approach could allow families to protect themselves from high lead levels in backyard soils. These lead levels can exceed hazardous waste standards due to the fall-out from leaded gasoline.

Lead-contaminated drinking water is the other big source of exposure to lead. Lead frequently leaches from lead pipes, brass faucets and lead solder into drinking water. Tragically, parents who boil water to make baby formula germ-free concentrate the lead, sometimes causing severe lead poisoning.

Lead in drinking water could be nearly eliminated by lowering water corrosiveness and removing lead pipes in the distribution system. But a new regulation is full of loopholes and gives water companies over 20 years to complete these actions.

For the sake of our children, federal policies must change. Congress should lead the way by enacting comprehensive legislation such as the Lead Contamination Control Act Amendments, the subject of a hearing Friday before my subcommittee. The future of our country is in the hands of our children. While they are in our hands, we must not poison their minds with lead.



By Rep. Henry A. Waxman, D-Calif., chairman, House health and environment subcommittee.