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Services Available to You

If you live near the Exide Technologies battery recycling plant in Los Angeles County, the Public Health Department wants to help you.

"We provide lead awareness education and free blood lead testing," says Vanessa Valenzuela, a County Public Health Nurse and your community liaison. "We also offer services and referrals, and will connect you to other services if you need them."

Find out more at:

**East Los Angeles Health Center
Exide Resource Center**

133 N. Sunol Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90063

Lead experts are available every Tuesday from 9:30 to 11:30 a.m.

Get a free blood lead test every Tuesday and Thursday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Once lead exposure has happened, a diet high in iron, calcium, vitamin C and plenty of liquids can help reduce levels in your body.

For more information, see publichealth.lacounty.gov/eh/exide or call 323-768-2500.

California's Largest Toxic Clean-up

Learn how seven southeast Los Angeles County neighborhoods became contaminated with lead

BY THEA MARIE ROOD

Exide Technologies, a battery recycling plant located in Vernon, California, released lead and other toxic chemicals over a 5-mile area for decades. Residents and officials forced its closure in 2015, but the massive cleanup effort is ongoing.

"Most of the contamination came through the chimneys," says Xugo Lujan, a community organizer who grew up in East Los Angeles and has family members still living in the impacted areas. "They would open car batteries and put them in these huge kettles to melt down the lead. Lead and arsenic went up through the smokestacks and contaminated all the surrounding cities. Acceptable lead levels are 80 parts per million, and soil tests in Boyle Heights and East L.A. have found lead levels at 5,500 parts per million—way, way above the threshold."

Adding to the community's outrage, according to Lujan, is that the smelting plant was issued annual temporary operating permits, despite it being out of compliance on regulations for many years. Exide also declared bankruptcy once officials proved the lead contamination was from its Vernon facility.

Aggressive cleanup campaigns are in effect from both the state and from Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, and both are free for residents. Organizers such as Lujan are helping inform the public of the health hazards of lead exposure.

This includes heart problems and cancer in adults, and even more significant symptoms in children.

"We know there are impacts on the learning ability in children ... and kids absorb 40-50% more lead than adults do," Lujan says, adding exposure

can even begin pre-birth if a pregnant woman is exposed to high levels of lead. "It can also increase aggressiveness in men, which may explain the higher number of people [from our community] in our prisons."

He urges people to get tested for lead exposure, and have their soil and homes checked, immediately arranging for the removal of any contamination. "People also need to get involved in the conversation," Lujan says. "In order to hold Exide accountable, we need the community to get involved."

"Acceptable lead levels are 80 parts per million, and soil tests in Boyle Heights and East L.A. have found lead levels at 5,500 parts per million."

Xugo Lujan
Community Organizer



Xugo Lujan, who grew up in East Los Angeles, urges residents to get tested for lead exposure.

Photo by Brian Averill

Symptoms of Lead Poisoning

Unfortunately, the symptoms of lead poisoning can be subtle – and often show up in children as learning or behavioral issues that are easy to dismiss as age-related.

Signs and symptoms of lead poisoning in children include:

- ✓ Developmental delay
- ✓ Learning difficulties
- ✓ Irritability
- ✓ Loss of appetite
- ✓ Weight loss
- ✓ Sluggishness and fatigue
- ✓ Abdominal pain
- ✓ Vomiting
- ✓ Constipation
- ✓ Hearing loss
- ✓ Seizures

Signs and symptoms for adults include:

- ✓ High blood pressure
- ✓ Joint and muscle pain
- ✓ Difficulties with memory or concentration
- ✓ Headache
- ✓ Abdominal pain
- ✓ Mood disorders
- ✓ Reduced sperm count and abnormal sperm
- ✓ Miscarriage, stillbirth or premature birth in pregnant women



The Importance of Lead Screening

A public health pediatrician and toxicologist explains why every family needs to consider their risks

BY THEA MARIE ROOD

Despite strides the United States has made in reducing lead exposure – taking lead out of gasoline, for example, and ending the manufacture of lead paints – lead poisoning remains the No. 1 pediatric environmental health problem.

Many older homes still contain lead paint, the major source of lead poisoning, particularly if it cracks or chips. “But there are still other sources, such as the dirt outside,” says Cyrus Rangan, M.D., the Director of the Toxicology and Environmental Assessment Branch of the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. “Younger kids get dirt on their hands, lick their hands. We don’t like to think about this, but the reality is kids eat one to two tablespoons of dirt every time they’re outside. This can be problematic over time if it is high-lead-content soil.”

Rangan says sources of lead also include parents’ employment and hobbies – they may bring lead dust home on clothes – and certain cultural make-up and paints that families sometimes use on babies. And an emerging problem, says Rangan, is imported candy.

This is especially concerning for children ages 0 to 4, when critical brain development occurs, and even low levels of exposure can have serious and lasting impacts on learning, cognition and behavior.

As a result, Rangan believes all pediatricians should do routine lead screening to rule out lead poisoning – or rule it in. “Everyone should be screened at ages 1 and 2 – both ages,” says Rangan. “The first screening shows lead that has accumulated in the first year, and at 2, children are more active, playing outside. Health insurance (including Medi-Cal) will generally always pay for it at these ages, too.”

By far the best way to deal with lead poisoning is by preventing it from happening in the first place. But if children are exposed to lead, it is better to identify it sooner rather than later, Rangan warns. “You can save your child from potentially a lifetime of problems if you detect it early.”

“You can save your child from potentially a lifetime of problems if you detect it early.”

*Dr. Cyrus Rangan, FAAP, FACMT
Public Health Expert*



What to Do

Get your soil tested

Lead can linger in contaminated soil for thousands of years and go unnoticed. The only way to know for sure is to have your soil tested.

To learn more, visit the California state Department of Toxic Substances Control residential cleanup website, <https://dtsc.ca.gov/residential-cleanup/>

Have your blood tested for lead

Make sure you request a blood lead test for yourself and your children. Kids under age 6 and pregnant women are at highest risk. Free blood lead testing is available to any person who lives, works, or goes to school in the communities near Exide. The only way to know if you have lead poisoning is with a blood lead test.

Call the Blood Lead Screening Hotline to request a free blood lead test: 1-844-888-2290.

All results are confidential.

Correctly maintain painted surfaces

Lead paint is still the main source of potential lead poisoning. Although lead paint was banned in 1978, peeling paint can expose old and dangerous paint underneath.

Call 626-586-1959 to request an application to see if you qualify for free services to remove lead paint hazards in and/or outside your home. If you qualify, your home will be tested for lead paint hazards.

Lead: Invisible Danger Lingers

Los Angeles County is committed to cleaning up contamination

BY DEBBIE ARRINGTON

Angelo Bellomo spent much of his career dealing with the health hazards of lead in Los Angeles County. First joining the county staff in 1974, the former Deputy Director of Health Protection for the County's Department of Public Health helped plan and implement lead mitigation efforts countywide.

Lead paint, which can be found on an estimated 720,000 homes built before 1951 in Los Angeles County, remains the **No. 1 source for lead poisoning.**

In addition, county residents in Bell, Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles, Huntington Park, Maywood and surrounding areas face another major source: the now-closed Exide battery plant.

Opened in the 1920s, the Exide plant pumped out toxic pollution for almost a century before shutting in 2015.

"The technology when that plant got started was very inefficient to control emissions," says Bellomo, who retired in August 2019. "It operated for nearly 100 years. It exposed generations of individuals who lived in those communities."

Exide recycled car batteries, taking out the lead and smelting it into huge ingots. Smelting turns the lead into a liquid and boils away contaminants; the molten metal is then poured into forms to re-cool.

"That whole process produces vapors," Bellomo explains. "The vaporized lead goes into the air. The vapors are very hot. They rise in the air and begin to cool."

That's when the vaporized lead turns into microscopic

dust particles with no taste or smell and are virtually invisible. "You could have it all over your property without knowing it," Bellomo says.

That lead dust contaminated the soil for several square miles surrounding the former factory. According to the state's Department of Toxic Substances Control, more than 10,000 residential lots and 20,000 homes were impacted.

"The area impacted is almost two miles out (from the factory site) in all directions," he adds. "About 100,000 people face elevated risk."

There is no safe level of lead exposure, particularly for young children. Exposure to lead has many long-lasting side effects in kids:

Lower IQ, learning disabilities, behavior disorders, hearing problems and abnormal bone growth. In teens and adults, lead exposure can lead to increased risk of violent crime and delinquent behavior.

"Lead is a neurological poison," Bellomo says. "It's very toxic to developing fetuses and young children."

"Lead persists in the environment; it doesn't break down," Bellomo adds. "Lead poisoning is like an insidious disease. It's an invisible poison. Low level chronic exposure to lead can be devastating."

"We've seen four or five generations impacted by this (site), and those impacts will continue until the last home is cleaned up," Bellomo says. "Residents should deal with this at the earliest possible time, so their communities don't have to go another generation of impact."

"Lead is an invisible poison."

Angelo Bellomo
Public Health Expert

The now-closed Exide battery plant in Vernon left a legacy of lead contamination. Photo courtesy of Los Angeles County Department of Public Health



From Protest to Clean-up

Residents helped force plant shutdown, now focused on lead removal

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

For most of his life, Mario Saenz didn't participate in protests. "I had never been involved in that type of event," says Saenz, a peaceful 72-year-old. "I spent my time working."

After retiring as a warehouse produce worker at 63 in 2011, Saenz joined his southeast Los Angeles County neighbors in fighting an entity that they felt threatened many families, including his own.

Saenz demonstrated in front of the Exide Technologies battery recycling plant in Vernon, about a mile northeast of his Maywood home. The protesters accused the plant of endangering the health of an estimated 100,000 people — mostly working-class Latinos living near Exide — by releasing tons of pollutants into the air.

A year before the plant closed in 2015, under a settlement with the U.S. Department of Justice, authorities confirmed the protesters' fears: Dirt samples from a small area revealed that the yards of about 200 homes — including Saenz's — were contaminated with lead, having absorbed toxic metal particles emitted by the plant for decades.

Additional tests showed that perhaps 10,000 homes within 1.7 miles from the plant also had elevated levels of lead, which can cause brain damage and other health effects.

"I was disgusted," Saenz says. "I was angry at (regulators) for allowing the plant to operate for many, many years under Exide's promises that the situation would improve. ... This company committed crimes against humanity."

Saenz and his brother had achieved the American dream in 1981, by purchasing two homes separated by a grassy 30-by-30-foot yard in Maywood.

Saenz' brother later moved. Mario Saenz and his wife Yolanda stayed; he became a landlord as well as a homeowner. Their first child, Virginia, was born in 1982; son Mario Jr. arrived in 1987.

"My children played in the yard," Saenz says. Once it was declared contaminated, his yard's soil was removed and replaced with clean soil.

The Saenz family had their blood tested for lead. The results showed no poisoning.

Unlike some homes in the toxic zone, the Saenz's homes contain no lead paint hazards.

Looking back, Saenz says when his neighbors decided they'd had enough and began to protest in 2010, their actions coincided with the fast-growing environmental movement. Now, their neighborhood is becoming a safer and healthier place to live.

"This company (Exide) committed crimes against humanity"

Mario Saenz
Longtime Homeowner



Mario Saenz fought for the closure of the Exide battery recycling plant.

Photo by Brian Averill

Prevent Lead Poisoning in your Home

Most children get lead poisoning by eating paint, soil or dust that contains lead. **Other sources of lead poisoning can include:**

- ✓ Imported toys, jewelry, candies and food products.
- ✓ Handmade, imported ceramics made with lead-based glaze or paint.
- ✓ Traditional home remedies such as Azarcon, Greta and Pay-loo-ah.
- ✓ Traditional cosmetics such as Kohl and Surma.
- ✓ Clothes and shoes from workers exposed to lead.

DO

- ✓ Wash your child's hands and toys often.
- ✓ Keep furniture away from paint that is chipped or peeling.
- ✓ Wet wipe window sills and other surfaces often.
- ✓ Wet mop floors instead of dry sweeping to stop the spread of dust.
- ✓ Wash clothes separately if you have been working or playing in the dirt outside.
- ✓ Grow your fruits and vegetables in containers above ground in your garden. Buy your soil instead of using the dirt in your yard.

DON'T

- ✗ Let your child chew on painted surfaces or eat paint chips.
- ✗ Dry-sand, dry-scrape, power-wash or sandblast painted surfaces.

Merle Guzman was concerned by lead contamination around her Boyle Heights home.

Photo by Brian Averill



Get the Lead Out

Have your home and property tested and repaired free of charge

BY THEA MARIE ROOD

Merle Guzman has lived in her Boyle Heights home for eight years, along with her young son Max and their two dogs. She had no idea the soil surrounding the home—and parts of the home itself—were loaded with lead.

"I knew we were close to [the city of] Vernon, where there are a lot of factories, and there is always a smell," Guzman says. "But it's crazy how chemicals are thrown through the air. I was in shock."

Her first indication anything might be wrong was when she received a letter in the mail informing her that her home's proximity to the battery plant qualified her for a soil check. The test revealed abnormal lead levels that called for action. "I had no idea," she recalls.

Other houses on her block—about five of them—also required swift action after lead testing, as did homes on neighboring streets. "It was really spread around," she says.

Guzman and her son displayed no symptoms of lead poisoning. Her son underwent a blood

lead test and the results showed no lead poisoning. Still, she understandably had concerns about the health risks to her family and readily agreed to repairs and clean-up.

Soil cleanup is provided via the state's Department of Toxic Substances Control. The three- to seven-day process was free and involved a crew digging down five inches and removing all soil, grass and plants, then installing new soil, new grass and new plants.

Next, she had her home tested for lead paint hazards — also a free service, but provided through Los Angeles County's Department of Public Health. A team came in for two days and checked every inch of her house, both inside and out. The interior was free of lead, but lead contamination

"Go out there and ask and find out all the resources available to make your home safe."

Merle Guzman
Boyle Heights Resident

was found on the exterior of her home due to lead paint. The family could stay in place during this round of repairs, but a crew replaced some wooden features, changed out four windows and screens, and repainted the house.

"Once they did all that, I felt better,"

Guzman says, adding she feels all residents should take advantage of these free services. "Go out and ask and find out all the resources available to make your home safe."

Lead Paint

If your home was built before 1978, it's possible it contains lead paint. In fact, the EPA reports 87% of homes built before 1940 and 69% of homes built before 1969 have some lead paint, although often under layers of new paint.

As the paint cracks or deteriorates, the lead also can show up in household dust; and home renovations may expose your family to lead, particularly if you do them yourself instead of hiring a lead-certified contractor.

? What to do



Keep children out of potentially contaminated areas. Don't allow children near old windows, old porches, bare soil, dirt next to an old home, or areas with chipping or peeling paint as well as old window putty that is chipping.



If your home contains chipping or peeling paint, carefully clean up chips immediately. First, spray with light water before clean up to make sure you do not create hazardous dust. Then, cover peeling patches with duct tape or contact paper until the paint can be safely removed.



You may qualify for this free Los Angeles County program if:

- Your home was built before 1978
- A child under age 6 lives or regularly visits the home
- Someone who lives in the home is pregnant



Call 626-586-1959 to request an application to see if you qualify for this program to remove lead paint hazards inside and/or outside your home. If no lead paint hazards are found, no work will be necessary.

Remember:

- No Cost
- Free Assessment
- Hablamos español

What You Need to Know About Lead Paint

Your home may be contaminated; the side effects can be devastating

..... BY DEBBIE ARRINGTON



In older neighborhoods, the danger of lead contamination can be as close as a peeling window sill. Lead's prevalence coupled with the potentially harmful side effects of lead poisoning make lead cleanup vital.

That danger also makes lead contamination a public health risk. Jennieve Assi, Environmental Health Specialist with the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, answered these common questions about lead contamination and clean up:

Why is lead so bad?

Exposure to lead:

- Increases the risk for damage to the brain and the nervous system
- Slows growth and development for young children
- Impairs hearing and speech
- Increases learning and behavior problems, such as reduced IQ, Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder, juvenile delinquency, criminal behavior

Most children with lead poisoning do not look or act sick. Symptoms, if present, may be confused with common childhood complaints:

- Stomach ache
- Crankiness
- Headache
- Loss of appetite

Lead poisoning is difficult to diagnose based on symptoms. People delay in seeking treatment. The only way to know is with a blood lead test.

Who is most at risk?

Pregnant women and children under 6 years old are most at risk and should be screened or tested for lead.

Can lead hurt pets as well as people?

Yes. Your pets may have contact with lead when they:

- Play in the dirt or soil that has lead in it
- Eat or lick lead paint chips or peeling paint from homes built before 1978
- Eat or drink from ceramic bowls
- Drink water that has lead in it
- Breathe lead-polluted air
- Play with toys that have lead in or on them

Signs of lead poisoning in pets may include:

- Loss of coordination
- Not eating
- Abdominal pain
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Seizures or tremors
- Behavioral changes.

Lead poisoning can be a serious condition for your pets and can only be diagnosed by a veterinarian using a blood test.

How can you tell if your home has lead contamination?

A home (or any building) is presumed to have lead paint if it was built prior to 1978. Free testing and remediation services are available for eligible households.

What are the most common signs of lead paint contamination?

Peeling or chipping paint and dust accumulation on horizontal surfaces (such as floors and window sills).

How can your home become contaminated by lead?

Renovating your home without proper containment may release dangerous lead dust or fumes into your home, especially if you do any of the following to lead paint:

- Use open flame burning or torching (such as blow torching)
- Dry-sand
- Dry-scrape
- Power wash
- Sandblast

How is lead paint contamination cleaned up?

- Removing peeling or flaking lead paint.
- Replacing deteriorated doors/windows.
- Repairing or patching interior and exterior walls.
- Wet-mopping and wet-wiping horizontal surfaces (such as floors, window sills, etc.)

Are these services available for free?

Homeowners, landlords and tenants may be eligible for free services. To find out if you're eligible, contact the Lead Free Homes L.A. program. Click on www.leadfreehomesla.com, email leadfreehomesla@lacda.org or call 626-586-1959.

Is your home eligible?



- ✓ **Do you have cracked, chipped or peeling paint?**
- ✓ **Was your home or apartment building built before 1978?**
- ✓ **Is there a child under age 6 or someone pregnant living in or frequently visiting your home?**

SIGN UP TODAY



- ☎ **626-586-1959**
- 🌐 **www.leadfreehomesla.com**
- ✉ **leadfreehomesla@lacda.org**

- **No costs**
- **Free assessment**
- **Hablamos español**
- **Licensed and bonded contractors**
- **All lead paint hazards removed from home**

- ☎ **For other lead-related questions, call 1-800-LA-4-LEAD (1-800-524-5323).**
- 🌐 **For Exide-related questions, visit <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/eh/exide/>**

Make your home healthy with Lead Free Homes LA

A free lead paint hazard remediation program

Legend

- Exide Technologies battery recycling plant
- Affected area
- City limits

If you live...

near the now closed Exide Technologies battery recycling plant in Vernon, your home may qualify for free services to remove lead-paint hazards inside and/or outside your home.

