



## **Lead in Toys**

*Philip J. Landrigan, MD, MSc, DIH, Professor & Chair, Department of Community and Preventive Medicine, Professor of Pediatrics, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York, NY 10029, USA.*

Lead is a highly toxic chemical and brain injury is the most serious consequence of pediatric lead poisoning. Young children are especially vulnerable to lead because their brains are rapidly growing and developing, and because their normal hand-to-mouth behavior increases the risk that they will take lead into their bodies from the environment.

Acute, high-dose poisoning, as can occur when a child swallows chips of lead paint, can cause convulsions, coma and even death. Children who recover are often left severely damaged. Lower dose exposure can cause loss of IQ, shortening of attention span and disruption of behavior as well as increased risk of dyslexia and school failure. This is described as "silent lead poisoning." Despite great reductions in lead exposure in the USA, silent lead poisoning still affects more than 250,000 1-6 year-old children.

Lead paint and lead-contaminated dust in homes built before 1978 are the two major sources of continuing exposure of US children to lead. Children are exposed to lead paint and dust in older, lead-painted housing that is poorly maintained, and also in homes where do-it-yourselfer parents are attempting to sand or remove lead-based paint without proper precautions.

Lead in toys has become a major problem in the USA. Lead-painted trains, lead-painted dolls and lead-contaminated plastic lunch boxes imported from China and other nations have become a major new threat to the health of American children. This is a very serious issue. Tens of thousands of children have been placed at risk of lead exposure this year because of contaminated imports. Millions of toys have been recalled. This situation reflects the grave weakness of the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission and the lack of federal controls on imported toys.

What can parents do? Most importantly, parents should avoid all painted toys this holiday season. Also they should avoid brightly colored plastic toys, because some of them have been shown to contain high levels of lead. Our recommended toys this year are:

- unpainted wooden toys
- sports equipment such as balls and gloves
- books

Parents should consider writing letters or sending emails to their Senators, Congressional representatives, state and local officials, and the White House to complain about the current situation. It is simply not right that this country should allow the entry of millions of dangerous toys in the weeks before the holidays.