

St. Clair County Health Department's Response to the Flint Lead Crisis
Op-Ed

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Lead has always been a major public health issue. The situation in Flint highlights the importance of lead prevention and good communication to avoid the negative effects of exposure.

In St. Clair County the majority of lead poisoning cases are in young children who have ingested lead through a paint source in homes built before 1978. Young children often put their hands and objects in their mouths, putting them more at risk for swallowing lead dust or paint chips. Other sources include; soil surrounding homes from flaking exterior lead based paint; food stored in *imported* ceramic dishes or pottery; *imported* cosmetics; folk medicine; and sometimes workplace exposure in lead-related industries. It is recommended that anyone under age 6 years old, as well as those at risk from household or occupational exposure, receive blood lead testing.

In St. Clair County, only 24.7% of children under the age of six were tested for lead in 2014. Of those tested, 0.8% (23 children) had confirmed blood lead level (BLL) >5 ug/dl (MI rate in 2014 was 1.9%). All blood lead levels are reported to the *Michigan's Healthy Homes and Lead Poisoning Surveillance System* (HHLPPSS) and we (St Clair County Health Department- SCCHD) review them on a regular basis. The SCCHD then responds with nursing and environmental home visits for high lead levels. We have an XRF lead-based paint analyzer for testing in homes and a licensed lead inspector to conduct home visits. Families with blood lead levels of 20 or above are referred to the State Lead Program for Elevated Blood Level (EBL) evaluation and possible assistance with abatement of the home. The SCCHD can also provide community outreach/education at various venues. To inquire about speaking engagements contact (810)987-5300.

Recently we met with municipal water treatment plant operators and reviewed their process for providing safe drinking water to their service areas. We shared important surveillance information about lead testing and prevention strategies for the community. Most importantly we agreed on a method of communication that will facilitate accurate information and response to concerned citizens. Overall, it is apparent that in St. Clair County very little lead exposure is through water. Water leaving our water treatment facilities does not contain lead. However, lead can be introduced into the distribution system from old pipes and connections. Lead can be found in some older water taps, interior water pipes or pipes connecting a house to the water main in the street. The only way to know if there is lead in your home's water is to have your water tested. For information on water testing, contact your local water treatment facility or call our Environmental Health Division (810)987-5306. To learn more about the water quality in your area, visit the website of your local water treatment facility and read the water quality "Consumer Confidence Report".

Working together can reduce the risk of lead exposure. Educating ourselves about our risks and taking the right steps to respond is critical. One important area of improvement is to test more of our children under 6 years old for lead. Visit our website www.scchealth.co to learn more.

Yours in Health,

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