Lead poisoning is a serious environmental risk for children under the age of six. Even low levels of lead exposure at this age can cause permanent cognitive and behavioral problems. Both Mexico-born and U.S.-born children of Mexican origin are at increased risk for elevated blood lead levels compared to other vulnerable groups and white children.¹,²

**Lead Toxicity**

Lead in paint, pottery glaze, and some food products are common sources of exposure. While acute lead toxicity has become a rare event, chronic low-level exposure is common. It is estimated that approximately 3% of all U.S. children aged 1 to 5 years have blood lead levels that exceed the reference level; this percentage is substantially higher in children of minority racial and ethnic groups.³ Children are at higher risk due to ingestion of dust and dirt and are more susceptible to the effects of toxicity due to their developing nervous systems.⁴

Signs and symptoms of lead poisoning in children may include:⁵

- Irritability
- Loss of appetite
- Weight loss
- Sluggishness and fatigue
- Abdominal pain
- Vomiting
- Constipation
- Learning difficulties

Transfer of lead to the fetus during pregnancy prexpose infants. Babies who are exposed to lead before birth may demonstrate:

- Learning difficulties
- Slowed growth

Long-term effects of lead toxicity:

- Decreased IQ
- Shortened attention span
- Decreased hearing and growth
- Aggressive, violent behavior

Lowered cognition persists long after exposure. Treatment of elevated blood lead levels does not improve cognitive outcomes later in life.⁶

**Increased Risk Factors among children of Mexican origin**

**Country of origin exposure**

- The use of lead-based gasoline began declining in Mexico during the 1990s but is still in use today.⁷ This has resulted in high levels of lead-contaminated soil especially near roadways.⁸
- Many paints in Mexico contain levels of lead that exceed World Health Organization recommendations and U.S. regulatory levels.⁹

**Exposure in the U.S.**

- Children of Mexican origin are more likely than white children to live in homes that contain lead-based paint. Children are exposed by inhaling dust and consuming paint chips.¹⁰
- Although lead was banned from gasoline in the United States in 1978, leaded car exhaust persists in soils. Consumption of lead-contaminated dirt is a major hazard for children living in housing near freeways.
- Mexican-origin adults in the U.S. are disproportionately likely to be exposed to lead in the workplace.¹¹ Children of these workers are likely to demonstrate elevated blood lead levels.¹²

**Exposure from Food, Water, and Medicine**

- Contamination of drinking water can occur through leaded plumbing; lead piping was used in construction until the 1980s.¹³ Laws regarding landlords’ disclosure responsibilities are rarely enforced, and tenants may not be aware of either their rights or the dangers of lead exposure.¹⁴
• Children and adults ingest lead from food stored in lead-glazed pots from Mexico. Acidic foods, such as salsas, release lead from the glaze.  

• Over 15% of lead poisoning cases are linked to lead-contaminated candy from Mexico, and lead is also found in some candy packaging.  

• Among Mexican immigrants, use of folk remedies imported from Mexico is common. Greta, a powder given to children for upset stomach, is over 14% lead by weight. Litargirio, used as a deodorant, is 79% lead.  

Educational, medical, and cultural barriers  
• Immigrant parents may not be aware of the dangers of lead toxicity or have access to educational resources that are culturally and linguistically appropriate.  
• Children of Mexican origin are more likely to not regularly visit a pediatrician. Furthermore, medical professionals may not screen for blood-lead levels.  
• Anti-lead campaigns may not be culturally or linguistically appropriate.  

Public Policy recommendations  
• Improve blood-lead level testing for children and women during their child-bearing years  
• Promote awareness of lead toxicity in the U.S. and Mexico  
• Develop linguistically and culturally appropriate educational materials  
• Promote international legislation to assure lead-free products  

Reference  

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