



CONVERSATIONS IN CARE

A Practical Guide for CHWs and Care Teams Rooted in Trust and Respect

Exposure to Lead

Why It Matters

Talking about lead can feel scary and confusing for families, especially when the risks are invisible and often inside their home. Parents may feel fear, guilt, or uncertainty, even though lead exposure is never their fault. Providers can make a big difference by responding with empathy, clear information, and reassurance. This guide supports respectful conversations that help families understand lead, take action, and feel supported every step of the way.

With the right support, families can reduce lead in their homes and keep their children safe. A calm, respectful conversation helps parents feel empowered rather than afraid.

This conversation guide aims to support providers in delivering information with compassion, creating a safe and respectful environment, and connecting families to the resources and support they need as they begin to navigate their journey.



Before the conversation

- Create a safe, respectful environment.
- Ask about what the family already knows or believes.
- Acknowledge that some words, beliefs, or traditions may be different, and that it is okay.
- At first, listen more than speak.





Questions

Answers

What is lead, and why is it dangerous?

Lead is a metal sometimes found in old paint, dust, and water. Dust from lead paint in pre-1950 homes is the main way children are exposed to lead in Maine. It can harm your child's brain, slow their growth, and make it harder to learn or pay attention. Lead poisoning is preventable when we know where it comes from.

"You can't always see lead, but you can stop it once you know it's there."

Children under 3 years are most at risk, but older children may also be at risk.



Tip: Start with reassurance and strength. Let the parent know they are doing the right thing by asking. Keep your explanation short and clear, and avoid technical language.

Where does lead come from?

Most lead is found in homes built before 1978, before lead was banned.

It can also be in soil near old buildings or in old plumbing pipes that bring water into the house.

Lead hazards can also come from old painted surfaces that are peeling, chipping, or turning into dust, especially around windows and doors where paint rubs.

Lead dust can spread through everyday activities, like sweeping, opening and closing windows, or when renovations disturb old paint.

Lead can also be found in:

- Dust and soil around older homes, factories, and busy roads.
- Imported products, like certain toys, spices, ceramics, and cosmetics.
- Old household plumbing, solder, or brass fixtures that leach lead into drinking water.
- Antique furniture or painted items from older generations.
- Lead dust can be brought home on clothes used by family members who work with lead in their jobs.



Tip: Help the parent picture real examples in their home without creating fear. Use gentle language and offer to look at risks together rather than pointing out 'problems.'



Questions

Answers

Can my home look clean but still have lead?

Yes. Lead dust is invisible and can spread from many places, like windows, floors, or old doors. Even a freshly painted home may still have old layers of paint underneath.

When those hidden layers crack or peel, tiny particles can enter the air and settle on toys, clothing, and surfaces where children play. Regular cleaning and wet wiping can help reduce dust, but the safest solution is to identify and safely remove the source of lead.



Tip: Remind families that cleanliness is not the issue — this prevents shame or blame. Focus on the house materials, not parenting practices.

How can I tell if my child has too much lead in their blood?

Most children with high blood levels look and act healthy. The only way to know is with a blood test. Maine requires testing at ages 1 and 2, or for any child at risk up through age 6. All children who have never had a lead test before the age of 6 should be tested.

Early testing is important because lead can affect a child's brain and development long before any symptoms are visible. Testing is quick, safe, and can be ordered by your child's doctor or clinic.



Tip: Explain testing as a tool to help determine if their child has been exposed or has high lead levels, and that it is not a sign that the parent has done anything wrong. Offer to support them in requesting testing from the child's doctor.

What happens if the test shows lead in my child's blood?

Your healthcare team will connect you to resources with the Maine CDC to help find and remove the source of lead. The Maine CDC may check your home and connect you with free programs that can fix the problem.

They will also guide you on ways to lower your child's lead level, such as improving home-cleaning routines, avoiding certain items, and making safe choices with food and water. Follow-up blood tests are usually done to make sure lead levels continue to decrease over time.



Tip: Stay calm and solution-focused. Emphasize that there is a plan, support is available, and families do not need to handle this alone.



Questions

Answers

Can high lead levels in the blood be treated?

There's no quick medicine, but by removing the lead source and with good nutrition (foods rich in iron, calcium, and vitamin C), your child's body can recover and grow stronger over time.

These nutrients help protect the body from absorbing more lead and support a child's brain and growth. Your doctor may also suggest follow-up testing to track progress and make sure lead levels continue to drop.



Tip: Sharing stories, reading books, and playing with children is important to counteract the harms caused by lead and improve developmental outcomes.

What if I rent my home and find peeling paint?

Maine landlords must fix peeling or chipping paint safely. You have the right to request repairs. If you need help, a public health nurse or community health worker can guide you through next steps. You can talk to them to determine if a free lead dust test kit is right for you.

They can also help you understand your rights as a tenant and what safe lead repair should look like. If your landlord does not respond, request help from your town's code enforcement staff.

If you own your home, contact your local community action program to ask about programs that remove lead hazards at no or low cost to you.



Tip: Explain the parents' rights clearly and without judgment. Offer to help them write a request to the landlord or connect them with local support.

How can I protect my family every day?

- Wash hands often, especially before eating.
- Clean windowsills and floors weekly with wet wipes or mops.
- Avoid peeling paint, and report it to your landlord.
- Give children healthy meals that build strong bones and blood.

Regularly wash toys, bottles, and pacifiers since lead dust can settle on items children put in their mouths. Use cold tap water for drinking and cooking (hot water can have an increased amount of lead).



Tip: Offer practical, low-cost suggestions that fit into busy routines.



Questions

Answers

Where can I find help or more information?

Share your concerns with your medical provider, social worker, or community health worker, and they will connect to someone who can help.

They can guide you through testing your home for lead and follow-up testing for your child, if needed. You do not need to handle the process alone as support is available to help you understand your options and keep your family safe.



Tip: Make the process simple by offering to call or refer on their behalf. Remind parents that asking for help is a strength, not a weakness.

Be patient and persistent.

Progress takes time, and lead levels do not drop overnight. You may need several follow-up tests to see improvement, and that is normal. Keep asking questions, and stay involved in the process, even if the steps feel slow.

If repairs or support take time, continue reaching out to your healthcare team and community resources. Every small step helps protect your child's health in the long term.



Tip: Partner with trusted community figures to increase awareness and understanding.

Note: These questions and responses were gathered from community members and developed with their voices and cultural insight. For more information or resources, visit MCD's Strengthening Patient Care webpage: mcd.org/technical-assistance-training/strengthening-patient-care