

Lead-Safe Texas

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Blood Lead Surveillance Branch

Texas Department of State Health Services

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With the support of communities throughout Texas, regional public health offices, and Texas healthcare workers, BLSB is working diligently toward a safer, healthier Texas.

About this Newsletter

This newsletter provides information on lead poisoning prevention. You will find all newsletters on our website at dshs.texas.gov/lead.

About the Blood Lead Surveillance Branch

The Texas Department of State Health Services Blood Lead Surveillance Branch (BLSB) maintains a surveillance system of blood lead test results for children and adults. Our goal is to eliminate lead poisoning as a public health problem in Texas. We do this by working with health, housing, and environmental organizations. With the support of communities, regional public health offices, and Texas healthcare workers, BLSB is working diligently toward a safer, healthier Texas.

What is Lead?

Lead is a highly toxic metal. In the past, lead caused extensive environmental contamination and health problems in many parts of the world. In 1978, the federal government banned the sale of lead-containing paint for consumer use to reduce the amount of lead in the environment.

If a home was built before 1978, there may be a chance it contains lead-based paint. Lead can also be in soil, drinking water, amulets, pottery, cosmetics, and even toys.

Testing has Decreased: Why it matters

Many things in our lives changed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Texas, toilet paper, Clorox wipes, and brisket were hard to find at the beginning. One change that affects children is the decrease in testing for lead poisoning.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says lead testing decreased during the pandemic. Compared to 2019, the US saw a 34% decrease in blood lead testing in children under the age of 6. Texas reported a 29% decrease in blood lead testing for the same period. The sharpest decrease was in April 2020, when there were 57% less tests reported.

The pandemic may have put children under the age of 6 at greater risk for lead poisoning. Children are spending more time at home. In some cases, more time at home and indoors could increase exposure if there are lead hazards in the home. The most common lead hazards are paint chips and dust. These come from deteriorating paint or DIY projects in older homes. You can find lead in upcycled or second-hand furniture, cookware, spices, brightly painted toys, and cultural items like evil-eye bracelets. Parents who work in places where there may be lead can also put their children at risk of exposure by unknowingly bringing home lead from work. All these sources increase a child's risk of lead poisoning.

What can you do? BLSB recommends these steps:

- Test children enrolled in Medicaid or live in a targeted zip code for blood lead. Visit our [Texas Childhood Blood Lead Screening Guidelines](#) for more information.
- Provide parents with guidance and education about the hazards of lead poisoning. You can find educational materials for parents on a variety of topics at dshs.texas.gov/lead.
- Weave lead education into a child's check-up. It's easier than you think! Provide nutritional guidance. Focus on iron, calcium, and Vitamin C. These three nutritional sources help prevent lead poisoning.
- Sign up for electronic reporting of lead test results with BLSB. Your practice can sign up using our form, or by visiting dshs.texas.gov/lead and clicking on the [Electronic Reporting Sign-Up link](#).

CDC has confirmed a decrease of 29% in blood lead testing for children under the age of 6 for the state of Texas.

When testing goes down...



Families aren't aware of child's risk



Delay in care coordination



Delay in environmental lead investigations



Poor picture of lead poisoning in Texas

What the Numbers Say

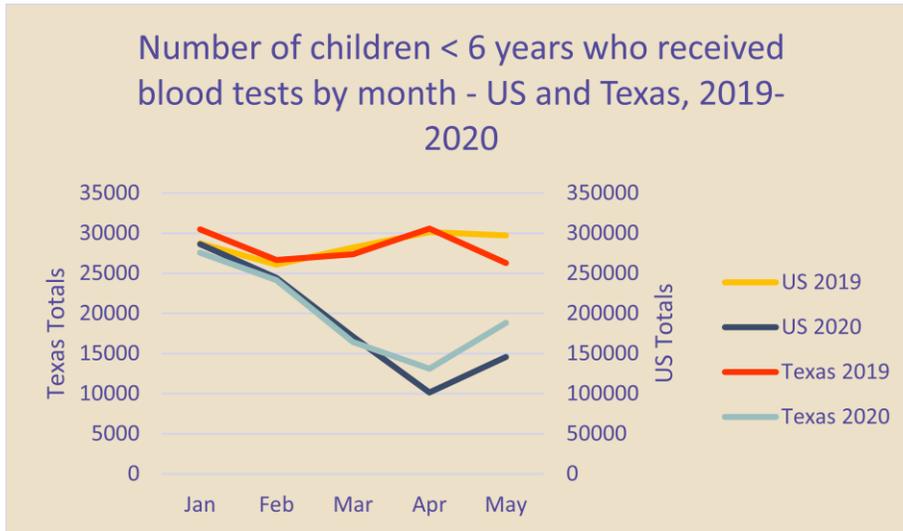


Figure 1 *Data from CDC MMWR, February 5, 2021, Vol 70, No 5

Investigating from a Distance: How Risk Assessors are Tackling the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented times. We at the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) worked to adapt to the changing times. BLSB, and the Case Coordination Team adapted as well. BLSB Certified Lead Risk Assessors could not travel and conduct lead investigations in homes. The Assessors and Case Coordination team worked to develop new procedures. This allowed us to continue to reach out to families of children with elevated blood lead levels.

Risk Assessors reached out via phone instead of in-person visits. They worked with families to help identify possible lead sources in each home. They shared communication tools and educational materials. Families welcomed the new protocol in the face of the pandemic.

During the calls assessors worked through our Lead Investigation Questionnaire. Together they identified possible lead sources. Some of the items identified include paint chips, dirt and soil, surma, makeup, pacifier holders, and glazed pottery. We assured families we would remain in communication and would follow-up regularly.

The ELI Process: Simple as 1, 2, 3

The Environmental Lead Investigation (ELI) is a key part for addressing lead poisoning in children who have elevated blood lead levels. Visit dshs.texas.gov/lead/providers.shtm to see how a child can qualify for an ELI.

In non-pandemic times, Risk Assessors travel to the child’s home to determine the source of lead and to provide education and guidance to the child’s family to prevent further exposure. Risk Assessors, with the aid of the Elevated Blood Lead Level Investigation Questionnaire, try to determine what the source of lead poisoning is within the house. Risk Assessors may also take samples of possible sources to be tested by a laboratory.

We started the alternative to home investigations in July 2020. We completed 85 initial interviews. And did 61 follow-up calls as of November 2020. Out of those 85 families, 57 children recorded decreased blood lead levels. The team continues to modify the process to ensure the health of Texas children and Risk Assessor's safety.

Retests are Best: How Retesting is a Key Part of Prevention

Paired with education, retesting children for blood lead levels can help to prevent further lead poisoning. Retesting children has its benefits. It can prevent a child's blood lead level from increasing. It can help providers and public health staff know where to start when it comes to removing or reducing lead exposure to a child. Retesting is a necessary, positive action that improves a child's health.

The pandemic might be changing how we care for our patients. We shouldn't let that keep us from retesting children. We know persistent lead poisoning causes various effects. Developmental delays, poor academic performance, and shorter attention spans are some effects linked to persistent lead poisoning. Making sure a child's blood lead level decreases is important to prevent further injury to a child's physical and behavioral health.

We know the effort it takes to retest. We are here to help. We reach out to parents and providers alike. The Case Coordination team sends letters to parents. We provide educational material on how lead poisoning affects their child's health. These letters serve to encourage parents to take their child in for retesting.

We send providers letters reminding them about the need to schedule the child for a follow-up visit. Follow-up is necessary for retesting. In some cases, we may even call providers to speak directly with them. Our nurse may answer any questions the provider or their staff may have and emphasize the need to follow-up.

In addition to education about follow-up, we recommend a venous sample over a fingerstick sample. Venous

samples can provide a clear picture for providers to determine if levels are decreasing, increasing, or even staying the same.

While there are many factors that make it difficult to retest, it is a key component to a child's recovery. We do recommend providers encourage parents to bring their child back for retesting. We recommend educating parents on the health effects of lead poisoning. We also encourage providers to remind parents that retesting is the best decision to make for their child's health.



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