

Lead in Vinyl Lunchboxes

Fact sheet

Should I be worried about lead in soft vinyl lunchboxes?

There is lead on the surfaces of some soft vinyl lunchboxes. Children might swallow some lead when they eat if it has rubbed off onto their food or hands. Right now, we don't have enough information to make a reasonable estimate about how much lead might be swallowed, which means we are not able to calculate the health risk. Until more information is available, DOH recommends that your child use a non-vinyl lunchbox to be on the safe side.

Lead poisoning continues to be one of the most frequently seen environmental health problems in the U.S. because many individuals are exposed to lead in paint and plumbing materials that remain in some homes. Although soft vinyl lunchboxes are expected to be a minor source of lead exposure, the possibility exists that they may contribute to some children's health risk. If your child already has exposure to lead-based paint or lead-containing plumbing materials, it is important to evaluate that exposure and avoid any additional exposure from other sources.

How was lead in soft vinyl lunchboxes found?

Recent tests commissioned by the Center for Environmental Health (a non-profit organization focused on public health matters) have shown that some soft lunchboxes made with vinyl contain potentially harmful levels of lead. Lead on the surfaces was detected with an at-home detection kit, but the actual amounts of surface lead present were not reported. In a second type of test, pieces of the vinyl were dissolved to measure the entire amount of lead contained in the fabric.

The Consumer Products Safety Commission (CPSC) has recently tested a limited number of vinyl lunchboxes and concluded that the amount of lead they found "would not present a health hazard to children." However, we don't know how many they tested or where they came from, so it's difficult to draw conclusions about the extent of the problem (if any) nationwide.

In the mid-1990s, the CPSC found lead in some vinyl mini-blinds and Greenpeace found lead in a variety of vinyl toys, backpacks and raingear.

Why do some vinyl products contain lead?

In order to help vinyl last longer, additives such as lead, cadmium, or organic tin compounds are mixed in during the production process.

Do all soft vinyl lunchboxes contain a lot of lead?

No. About 25% of the lunchboxes had significant amounts of lead and about 75% didn't. Different manufacturing companies use different additives to stabilize the vinyl they produce, and the finished products can use vinyl from a variety of sources

How can I tell whether or not my child's lunchbox has lead in it?

Testing is the only way to be sure. Test kits are available on-line, but they may cost more than the lunchbox.

What can I do if I am concerned?

- Regularly washing the lunchbox with warm, soapy water may help remove some of the lead that is on the surfaces.
- Use plastic wrap or sandwich bags to keep food from touching the surfaces of the lunchbox.
- Use a non-vinyl lunch container such as a metal lunchbox or a cloth or paper bag.

Why is lead a problem?

Lead is toxic and has no known function in the human body. Young children are most susceptible to the toxic effects of lead. Lead poisoning can affect almost every system of the body and often occurs with no obvious or distinctive symptoms. Long-term exposure to even low levels of lead can cause irreversible learning difficulties, mental retardation, and delayed neurological and physical development.

Can I get my child tested for lead exposure?

If you are concerned that your child had been exposed to lead, you should talk to your doctor or other health care provider about getting a blood lead test.

For more information:

- Department of Health Toll-Free Lead Hotline: 1-800-909-9898
- Department of Health Lead Web
Site: <http://www.doh.wa.gov/EHSPHL/Epidemiology/NICE/Lead/default.htm>
- Center For Environmental Health Lunchbox Test Web
Site: <http://www.cehca.org/lunchboxes.htm>
- Consumer Products Safety Commission Lunchbox Test Web Site:
<http://www.cpsc.gov/phth/vinyl.html>

For questions or additional copies, please contact:

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For persons with disabilities, this document is available on request in other formats.

Please call 1-800-525-0127 (TTY/TDD 1-800-833-6388).

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