

Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Childhood Lead Poisoning – What the Data Means

Coldwater, MI. Childhood lead poisoning has been a discussion topic on the state and national level for several months and many people in Branch, Hillsdale and St. Joseph Counties are beginning to question if they should be concerned. The Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency, the counties' local public health department, has received several inquiries in regards to childhood lead screening results, water testing and lead paint associated with older homes. The health department is working to address these questions. According to Rebecca Burns, Health Officer of the tri-county agency, "We want to make sure that people are knowledgeable about the screenings and tests available and can make informed decisions about which tests are beneficial and how to use the results they receive."

To assist local residents, the health department is releasing three documents on their website. The first is titled "2013 Data Report on Childhood Lead Testing and Elevated Levels." This report is a chart book produced by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services which provides the most current data at the county and zip code level for childhood blood level results. Kim Wilhelm, Prevention Services Director for the health department, states "Every lab in the state is required to report lead results to the state for surveillance purposes. This data includes capillary results obtained through a finger stick; blood results obtained through a venous draw; and test results gotten using a lead care machine." Kim adds "By law, all test results – regardless of where they are performed – must be reported to the state." Lead screenings are done routinely as part of a well child visit by physicians. They are also required for all children in WIC or children enrolled in head start.

Often times, the first lead test is a screening. Children receive a finger poke and the screening is done on a small drop of blood. If a child's results indicate an elevated blood lead level, then a venipuncture is suggested to verify the results. Kim adds

“Unfortunately, the finger stick is prone to a higher rate of false positives. So, in order to assure that the child really does have lead poisoning, the second test is needed.”

A review of 2014 data for Branch, Hillsdale and St. Joseph County children under six years of age indicates the following number of children had elevated blood lead levels (BLL).

	# of Children Screened	≥ 5 Ug/DL via screening	≥ 5 Ug/DL Confirmed by venipuncture	Total ≥ 5 Ug/DI Unconfirmed/ Confirmed	% with Elevated BLLs who were screened
Branch	668	19	<6	23	3.4%
Hillsdale	814	16	< 6	19	2.3%
St. Joseph	1,012	31	10	41	4.1%

Making sense of the results. Rebecca Burns states “In 2014, the percentage of children with elevated BLLs was 3.5%. Branch and Hillsdale County, the percentage of children with elevated BLLs was lower, whereas in St. Joseph County the percentage was higher. This could have occurred for a number of reasons, including the number of children who are screened versus the number of children should be screened; the sensitivity of the finger prick test; and the lack of adequate follow-up.”

Number of children who receive screenings. The CDC recommends that all children under age 6 years receive a lead screening. Unfortunately, this does not occur. In Branch County only 19.1% of children were screened. In Hillsdale and St. Joseph, the percentages were 24.8% and 19.7% respectively. Kim Wilhelm states “All children who are covered by Medicaid health insurance are eligible for screenings during a well child visit. All children who receive WIC are screened at one year and then annually afterwards. Lead screening is also a requirement for enrollment in head start. However, not all children receive well child visits and parents can refuse testing if they so desire.”

Sensitivity of the finger stick test. The finger stick test is a fast and efficient way to screen children quickly. However, this test is prone to false positives. Kim states “While a venipuncture draw is the most accurate way to screen, it is also more difficult to get and scary for the child. If a child is identified as having an elevated BLL through the finger stick, we recommend follow up with a venipuncture, if possible. Often times,

this test will come back and show that the original test was a false positive.” Parents make the final decision as to whether confirmatory tests occur.

Follow-up with families. The health department attempts to follow-up on children who have a blood lead test above 10 Ug/Dl. If a child has an elevated test above 20 Ug/Dl, the health department, working with state staff, tries to schedule appointments for an on-site lead assessment. “This is can be difficult because often times parents don’t return phone calls and/or families move away” Kim adds.

To assist parents in better understanding why their children should be screened, what the results mean and what to do if the results are high, the health department has added a new Frequent Asked Questions (FAQ) to their website titled “Childhood Lead Screening.” The FAQ is available free.

In addition, the health department has added a second free FAQ titled “Lead Safe Home.” According to Rob Stauffer, Environmental Health Director, “Within the tri-county jurisdiction, lead paint is the most probable source of lead contamination. Nearly two-thirds of the homes were built prior to 1978 and most likely contain lead paint. Lead remediation is important to assure that small children do not consume paint chips from peeling window seals, molding or walls. Lead paint is sweet to the taste, so it’s natural for teething children to want to chew on it. Lead dust from deteriorating paint, or created during home renovations can also end up on kids toys and be ingested.” Cleaning for lead dust is an important prevention method and is included in the FAQ.”

To learn more about childhood lead poisoning or how to ‘lead safe’ your home, visit the health department’s website at www.bhsj.org and click on ‘Quick Info About Health Topics.’”

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