

Researcher warns pregnant women to be especially cautious of lead exposure

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(PhysOrg.com) -- In 2010, most everyone knows about the dangers of lead. But, a researcher from West Virginia University warns pregnant women that lead can be harmful to their babies in even the smallest quantities.

While numerous studies have shown the dangers of high-level lead exposure, Motao Zhu, M.D., Ph.D., assistant professor in the WVU Department of Community Medicine, and his colleagues examined whether [pregnant women](#) exposed to low levels of lead were at a higher risk for low birth weight babies.

Dr. Zhu said people are exposed to lead more often than they think. Women have 1.2 micrograms per deciliter of lead in their bloodstreams. At 10 micrograms per deciliter, the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) recommend public health actions be taken. Once an individual is exposed to lead, it can be absorbed into the body for decades.

According to Zhu's study, a lead level of 5 micrograms per deciliter was associated with an average decrease in birth weight of 61 grams, or 2.15 ounces. At the higher level of 10, an 87 gram (or 3.07 ounces) decrease in birth weight was shown. Babies born weighing less than 2,500 grams (or 5 pounds, 8 ounces) are considered low birth weight.

"We definitely recommend women get screened during pregnancy or prior to becoming pregnant, if possible," Zhu said.

Generally, when people think of lead they think of its former uses in paint and gasoline. The U.S. government banned lead-based paint in 1977 and the use of lead in gasoline for on-road vehicles in 1996. However, on average, 70 percent of the houses in West Virginia were built before 1980, which means that most if not all of them may have at least some lead-based paint in them, Zhu said.

In addition, because lead is found in soil, people who live near roadways, old orchards, mining areas, industrial sites, [power plants](#), incinerators, landfills and hazardous waste sites should be especially mindful of [lead exposure](#). Zhu said a simple [blood test](#) can show how high a person's lead level is.

This study will be published in *Environmental Health Perspectives*.

Provided by West Virginia University

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