

Lead levels down in U.S. kids, but asthma cases rising

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Report looks at the environment's effect on children's health.

(HealthDay)—Lead levels in young children in the United States have declined dramatically in recent decades, according to government figures released Friday. But the new report on the environment and children's health also found a rise in asthma among kids.

"This latest report provides important information for protecting America's most vulnerable—our children. It shows good progress on some issues, such as reducing children's blood lead levels and exposure to tobacco smoke in the home, and points to the need for continued focus on other issues," [Environmental Protection Agency](#) administrator Lisa Jackson said in a news release.

The average blood concentration of lead measured in children aged 1 to 5 years was 92 percent lower in 2009-2010 than in 1976-1980, according to the EPA. Most of that decline occurred in the 1980s, but consistent

decreases have continued since 1999.

In more good news, the average level of cotinine—which indicates exposure to secondhand tobacco smoke—in the blood of nonsmoking children aged 3 to 17 was 88 percent lower in 2009-2010 than in 1988-1991. In 2010, 6 percent of children from newborn to age 6 years lived in homes with a regular smoker, compared with 27 percent in 1994.

The percentage of children living in counties where [air pollution](#) concentrations exceeded one or more national air quality standards declined from 75 percent in 1999 to 59 percent in 2009, according to the report.

However, the asthma rate among children rose from 8.7 percent in 2001 to 9.4 percent in 2010, the report said, with [minority groups](#) particularly affected by the respiratory disease.

While the actual causes of asthma are unclear, substantial evidence suggests that exposure to certain air pollutants can trigger symptoms in children who have asthma. And although the [childhood asthma](#) rate has increased, the severity of children's asthma and [respiratory symptoms](#) has declined, according to the report.

[Emergency room visits](#) for asthma fell from 114 visits per 10,000 children in 1996 to 103 visits per 10,000 children in 2008, the investigators found. From 1996 to 2008, hospitalizations for asthma and for all other respiratory causes dropped from 90 to 56 per 10,000 children.

The report also noted that rates of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and preterm births have risen, but there is no conclusive information on the role that environmental contaminants

might play in those conditions.

"Although we are encouraged by these findings, there is still much work to be done," Jackson said. "By monitoring trends, identifying successes and shedding light on areas that need further evaluation, we can continue to improve the health of our children and all Americans."

More information: The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency outlines what you can do to protect children from [environmental risks](#).

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