

EPA moves to reduce childhood exposure to lead-based paint dust

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The Biden administration on Wednesday moved to reduce children's exposure to lead, proposing stricter limits on dust from lead-based paint in older homes and child-care facilities.

Declaring that "there is no safe level of lead," the administration estimates that the proposed rule would reduce lead exposure for approximately 250,000 to 500,000 children under the age of six each year.

That's important because [health scientists](#) have said for some time there is no safe level of lead in a child's blood. Lead's damage to the brain is well known: It takes points off IQ, deprives kids of problem-solving abilities, and can make it harder to learn to read. But it also affects other organs, including the liver and kidneys.

"This proposal to safely remove [lead paint](#) along with our other efforts to deliver clean drinking water and replace lead pipes will go a long way toward protecting the health of our next generation of leaders," Janet McCabe, deputy director of the Environmental Protection Agency, said in New Jersey, where the proposal was announced.

Paint that contains lead was banned in 1978, but because paint is applied in layers and then chips off or is sanded off during remodeling, more than 30 million American homes are believed to still contain it.

The proposed rule targets levels of lead dust. Currently 10 micrograms per square foot is considered hazardous on floors, and a concentration 10 times that high is considered hazardous on window sills. The new rule brings both of those down to no detectable lead.

Apart from what constitutes a hazard, the proposed rule would reduce what's allowed when a lead contractor, often called a lead abatement contractor, finishes work on a property where lead has been a problem. These levels would be 3 micrograms per square foot on the floor and 20 micrograms per square foot for sills.

Public health experts celebrated the announcement, calling the proposed

rule long overdue.

Dr. Philip Landrigan noted the government has gradually been reducing the standard for what counts as poisonous levels of lead in the blood of children, with the most recent change occurring two years ago. But the EPA announcement marks an effort to take more preventive action, he said.

"When you are relying on the blood lead level in children to indicate whether there is lead in the environment, we are basically using the children as canaries in the mine," said Landrigan, a Boston College biology professor who directs the schools Program for Global Public Health and the Common Good.

"This way we actually dealing with the source, as opposed to the consequences of exposure," he said.

But Cindy Lehnhoff, director of the National Child Care Association, worried that the rule change could hurt child care centers that are already struggling financially—especially those in low-income neighborhoods, where the facilities tend to be older.

"No doubt they would be the ones most affected by this change," Lehnhoff said by email. "I certainly hope our U.S. legislators realize that this rule needs to be backed up with money to make it happen."

David Rosner, a public health historian at Columbia University and expert on the history of lead regulation in the United States, expressed surprise at the EPA announcement, given that new environmental regulations have become more difficult and controversial in recent years. "It's nice that they are trying to move at least on this one, obvious, long-term problem that we've had for a century," Rosner said.

He applauded the rule as an overdue overdue recognition that no level of [lead exposure](#) is safe for children.

Bruce Lanphear, a lead poisoning expert at Canada's Simon Fraser University, said the current standard "was based on what was thought to be feasible rather than on science," and this corrects that.

But Rosner also noted it is currently just a proposal and will likely face opposition from landlords and others who will likely lament the cost of more aggressive cleanups.

"It will be interesting to see what politics play out," Rosner said.

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