

Alarm Grows Over Toxins

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sponding to the growing public concerns.

“The county has a really interesting role in that we don’t regulate lead in the water or radon, and those (toxins) aren’t in our buildings,” said public health information officer Julie Sullivan-Springhetti. “But the people in those buildings are our residents, and Multnomah County cares about health.”

Under the backdrop of a Change.org petition calling for Portland Public Schools Superintendent Carole Smith’s resignation over the toxicity issues, and others demanding more action from government officials, education on the home front can offer some preventative safety tips.

“There’s always a little bit of lead floating around in your liver and your muscles,” says Dr. Zane Horowitz of the Oregon Poison Center. “Levels between 0-5 (micrograms/deciliter) aren’t unusual for kids that live in an inner city environment.”

Since lead was used in everything from paint to children’s toys to piping for hundreds of years, its presence is still prevalent in many of Portland’s older homes and buildings. The problem, Dr. Horowitz says, lies in the length of exposure time and the height of levels in the blood stream.

According to the health department brochures, extended exposure to lead can cause learning and behavioral problems, brain damage, speech impairment, stunted growth, liver damage, seizures and coma. Severe cases can be fatal.

Dr. Horowitz says a binding agent called Succimer, also known as Chemet, is a prescription for treatment that can bind metals in the body and help excrete the toxins over a period of time.

“It does take a while,” says Dr. Horowitz. “Sometimes it could take months or as high as a year depending on how long they’ve been exposed to it and the levels in their body.”

Horowitz says blood lead levels need to be or exceed 45 micrograms/deciliter to receive a Succimer treatment.

The risks for high lead levels would be lower in school because a child is in attendance for limited hours.

“You can ask your child if they drink a lot of water at school. If it’s just a sip every now and then, there’s probably not the highest risk of them having high levels in their system,” explains Dr. Horowitz.

Multnomah County works

with WIC (Women, Infants and Children program) to provide free lead blood testing for children less than six years of age and pregnant women.

“We want families to recognize the potential risks of lead poisoning so they can do due diligence in keeping their homes free,” says Mary Kay DiLoreto,

In the last three years, every lead test that’s been taken in a doctor’s office or in a pop up clinic was recorded by the state.

We know from those 15,000 tests that 188 were positive for lead in children under 19, with about 170 of those cases for children under age six, Sullivan-Springhetti says.

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the program supervisor for WIC Northeast, which operates a pop up clinic out of Multnomah County’s Walnut Park building at 3929 NE Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.

About 80 of these clinics are held every year at various locations around the county intended to inform and educate the public on lead risks and prevention.

Unfortunately, extended exposure to radon gas and airborne heavy metals isn’t as easy to identify or counteract.

Of all the carcinogenic toxins Portlanders have been involuntarily exposed to lately, radon is the number one cause of lung cancer in people who don’t smoke cigarettes, according to the U.S. Environmental Protec-

tion Agency.

“There really is no treatment for removing radon from your body,” says Horowitz, “and there are no immediate effects at all, just the lifelong risk of getting lung cancer becomes higher.”

People exposed to toxins 8 hours a day for life, for example, would have higher levels to the risks of increasing cancer, says Dr. Horowitz. He said the real risk for people who garden or

pointing risks and solutions.

Taking on these health issues one at a time, the county is tackling lead first with a public outreach to get people tested. Portland Public Schools will test every school this summer for lead.

“We want to go to and work with the community, so we’re hoping this is the beginning of the conversation and that by the time this horrible experience with Portland public is over that we will have a lot of people that know a lot about lead,” says Sullivan-Springhetti.

Multnomah County encourages concerned citizens and parents to get their blood lead levels tested, as well as the water fixtures in their homes.

“We want people to know that no matter whom you are, no matter where you live, you have a right and you have access to the county coming to help answer questions about your health. That’s what’s really important,” says Sullivan-Springhetti.

For more information on lead and testing, contact the county Leadline at 503-988-4000 or email leadline@multco.us. A list of free testing dates and locations for pregnant women and children under six can be found at <https://multco.us/health/lead-poisoning-prevention/getting-your-child-tested-lead>.

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