



## **THE RISK OF SALVAGED BUILDING COMPONENTS**

By Jo Becker, Education/Outreach Specialist, Fair Housing Council of Oregon

Mary and Jacob had been searching for a door with some character to highlight the entrance to their new home. They eventually found a raised-panel door with a picture window at a salvage yard that seemed perfect. They especially liked the fact that they would be doing right by the environment by giving new life to a piece of an old 1800's farm house. The door still had the original paint on it, but the paint was in pretty bad shape. "We thought it was the diamond in the rough..." explained Mary.

The salvage yard offered to chemically strip the paint for a small, added fee, which they agreed to. Unfortunately, Mary says in hindsight, "We didn't think to ask about whether the paint might have contained lead. There were no warning signs or information regarding the possibility the door might contain lead paint."

The chemical stripping process raised the grain of the wood leaving splinters and wood fibers that Jacob needed to sand down in order to refinish the door. What he didn't realize was that while the chemical stripping methods remove visible paint, a significant amount of lead from the original paint can leach into the wood itself. Jacob chose an upstairs room in their house that was still under construction to do the work and spent several hours power sanding to get the door smooth. Unaware of the hazards, he took no precautions such as wearing a respirator or taking steps to prevent the spread of dust in the home. As he worked, a fine layer of dust settled throughout the upstairs and the contamination level grew to very dangerous levels.

A routine mailing to area households from the health department made its way to Mary and Jacob's home. Mary admits, "I actually sat on the mailing for over a month because I didn't think you needed to worry about testing if you lived in a new home..." When she did follow up and had their children, Naomi and Elijah, tested, the level of lead in Naomi's blood was extremely high indicating toxic levels of lead poisoning. A greater surprise was that Jacob also had a high blood level but Mary and their son, Elijah, did not. Mary started making calls and eventually got to the bottom of the problem thanks to a great deal of sleuthing on the part of the Housing & Conservation Board. "Jacob's elevated lead level had come from the dust he inhaled while he was sanding, and Naomi had ingested the settled dust while crawling around on the floors," according to Bob Zatzke with the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board. Bob says the likely reason that Mary and Elijah had not been poisoned was that Mary had not been in the work area to breathe in the airborne paint dust and Elijah, at age six, spent much less time putting things in his mouth as compared to his one-year old sister, Naomi. Bob explained to Mary that hand-to-mouth behavior is commonly recognized as the primary means by which small children ingest lead dust, although intake through the mucus membranes is also possible.

Mary said, "We were so surprised to learn that even though there was no paint visible, that so much contamination could happen." Mary and Jacob threw themselves into the task of cleaning and wet wiping all of the surfaces in the affected rooms. Luckily, dust samples indicated that the contamination had been limited to the home's upstairs. "I have to admit," says Mary, "I was getting pretty grumpy after ten hours of vacuuming <with a special HEPA vacuum from the Housing & Conservation Board> in one day."

All their hard work paid off; subsequent tests indicated the contamination was gone and their home was safe once again. However, the long-term health effects for Jacob and little Naomi are uncertain. Studies have linked chronic exposure to even low levels of lead exposure to developmental and neurological problems in humans, especially the developing bodies of small children. The possible health affects are wide reaching from lowered IQ levels to reproductive problems and many, many more conditions. The *only* way to know if one has been poisoned by lead exposure is to do a blood level test.

Mary's advice? "People should think twice and ask about lead paint when they buy old building components." Anyone that works with older building components or antique furniture, even when the original paint is not visible, should be aware that lead can cause serious and incurable physiological damage. Although the sale of lead-based paint was banned in 1978, it remains in about 24 million homes according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. According to Rebecca Morley, executive director of the National Center for Healthy Housing, "We estimate that each year, renovation and painting work exposes 1.1 million children to the risk of lead poisoning.

Epilogue: Several months later, Bob Zatzke with Vermont Housing & Conservation Board checked in on Mary and Jacob and at last report Naomi's language and speech skills seemed to be developing normally. As a result of this and other similar incidences, Bob was involved in moving a proposal for point-of-sale warnings regarding lead and salvaged building components into law in his state.

In addition to lead-based paint on the walls or salvaged pieces brought into the home, it has been determined that about 75% of pre-1978 bathtubs have lead in their glaze and that about 40% of these tubs will have measurable levels of lead dust when dust samples are collected from the surface of the glaze. Older claw foot tubs, like well-appointed front doors, are another popular retro salvage yard item.

A fair housing-specific note... Although lead poisoning is especially serious for young children (including unborn infants), the fear of possible lead poisoning or liability does not give housing providers the right to deny or discourage families with children from pre-1978 homes or apartments. Familial status is a protected class under federal fair housing law and doing anything to deny or discourage otherwise qualified families with children away from a home you're selling or renting is patently illegal<sup>1</sup>.

If you have specific lead questions, would like copies of lead materials currently available, or want to know more about blood lead level testing, contact the National Lead Information Clearinghouse at 800/424-LEAD or the Leadline in Oregon at 503/988-4000 or LeadLine.org.

### **Encourage your clients or residents to attend a free workshop**

([communityenergyproject.org/lpp\\_about.html](http://communityenergyproject.org/lpp_about.html)) to learn more about lead, lead hazards, and living lead safe. Consider hosting a Lead Safe Home Projects Workshop for those you know who are DIYS remodelers and home hobbyists, or schedule a lead basics class for your office or organization! Contact Jo Becker at 503/453-4016 or [jbecker@FHCO.org](mailto:jbecker@FHCO.org) or call the Portland-based nonprofit, Community Energy Project (CEP) directly at 503/284.6827 for more information about the free classes. 'Live or work outside the Portland metro area? CEP is considering taking their classes on the road; give them a call and let them know you would like to see them in your

---

<sup>1</sup> Federally protected classes under the Fair Housing Act include: race, color, national origin, religion, sex, familial status (children), and disability. Oregon law also protects marital status, (legal) source of income, and sexual orientation (inclusive of gender identity). Washington law covers marital status, sexual orientation, and honorably discharged veterans / military status. Additional protected classes have been added in particular geographic areas; visit [FHCO.org/mission.htm](http://FHCO.org/mission.htm) and read the section entitled "View Local Protected Classes" for more information.

community. You'll be utterly amazed how much you didn't know (that you really need to know) about lead in housing.

**As a housing provider, you also need to be sure you're current on all of the government's federally mandated lead disclosure requirements!** Read the section on "Legal Requirements" at [FHCO.org/lead.htm](http://FHCO.org/lead.htm).

For a medical journal article by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on lead exposure and furniture refinishing visit: [cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5013a2.htm](http://cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5013a2.htm)

---

This article brought to you by the Fair Housing Council; a nonprofit serving the state of Oregon and SW Washington. Learn more and / or sign up for our free, periodic newsletter at [FHCO.org](http://FHCO.org). Much of the article above is compliments of Bob Zatzke of Vermont Housing & Conservation Board's Lead-Based Paint Hazard Reduction Program.

**Qs about your rights and responsibilities under fair housing laws?**

Visit [FHCO.org](http://FHCO.org) or call 1-800-424-3247 Ext. 2.

**Qs about this article? Want to schedule an in-office fair housing training program or speaker for corporate or association functions?**

Contact Jo Becker at [jbecker@FHCO.org](mailto:jbecker@FHCO.org) or 503/453-4016.

**Have property to promote?**

Advertise vacancies or for-sales free across the Portland / Vancouver market at [HousingConnections.org](http://HousingConnections.org)!