

Health

Mercury is present in some indoor paint



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Dear Dr. Meinig: You recently wrote about the risks of mercury poisoning from broken fever thermometers but isn't the mercury in paints a bigger risk, particularly to children? Not too many people know that paint contains mercury. Why does it? U.O.

Dear U.O.: As of August 20, 1990, the Environmental Protection Agency banned the use of mercury in indoor paint and are requiring outdoor paint that contains it to carry warning labels. However, they have allowed the use of existing supplies, providing they contain less than 200 parts per million of mercury.

This dangerous, volatile element is in 25% to 30% of all indoor latex paints and 20% to 35% of exterior paint. It is used in order to prevent mildew and prolong paint shelf life.

The EPA ban finally came in 1989 when a four-year-old boy in Michigan fell ill with acrodynia, infant and early childhood mercury poisoning. He became sick ten days after the inside of his home had been painted with interior latex

paint containing phenylmercuric acetate, a mercury-based fungicide.

His illness was accompanied by itching, swelling, skin rash, sweating and irritability, and this alternated with listlessness.

The October 1990 New England Journal of Medicine reported that the paint, manufactured by the Mercury Paint Company, contained 2 1/2 times the amount of mercury recommended by the E.P.A. Researchers are studying 19 other families who painted their homes with paint from the same company.

Babies and young children are particularly prone to poisoning, as they spend more time indoors and on floors. Mercury fumes tend to drift downward.

Other symptoms of acute mercury poisoning are: pinkness and peeling of hands, feet and nose, excessive perspiration, insomnia, emotional instability, headaches, short-term memory impairment, and serious damage to the nervous system and kidneys.

Adults can also be involved. Those most affected usually are painters and family members who do their own decorating.

Although a large part of the mercury is gassed off in a few days, the residual leakage into the house can continue for months. No one has really studied how long it lasts, but the danger is cumulative.

Thorough airing of the house each day is mandatory. Vitamin C and lactobacillus acidophilus powder in water or tablets and yogurt are helpful, but medicine is necessary to help remove the mercury that has accumulated in the body.

Those contemplating painting should check carefully with their paint suppliers and avoid any indoor paints they may still have on hand. Information about the mercury content of existing paints is available from the national Pesticide Telecommunications Network, 1-800-858-7378.

Everyone has a question about nutrition. Send yours to Dr. George E. Meinig, c/o Ojai Valley News, Box 277, Ojai, CA 93023.