

Managing lead paint in ACT public schools

More than two-thirds of our public schools were built before 1992. Just like homes and businesses built at this time, schools were painted with lead paint.

Lead paint isn't used any more, but we need to make sure these older buildings remain safe for students, staff and school communities – this is always our highest priority.

The ACT Government has committed \$15 million to remove hazardous materials from public schools over the next four years, part of a larger package of \$114 million to upgrade our schools to keep them comfortable and safe.

What is lead paint?

Lead is a naturally occurring metal element used widely in manufacturing.

Up until 1969, paint was allowed to have 50 per cent lead content. This was reduced over time to less than 1 per cent lead content in 1992.

Lead paint is a hazard. In other words, it has the potential to cause harm.

It becomes a risk when it deteriorates, is damaged or disturbed, and is subsequently inhaled or swallowed.

This hazard needs to be managed anywhere lead paint was previously used or could be present. For example, when old houses are renovated or demolished, qualified or licensed contractors are needed to make sure any lead paint is removed safely.

More information: <https://painters.edu.au/Consumer-Information/Lead-Paint-Hazards.htm>

Lead paint in ACT public schools

The Education Directorate regularly inspects public school buildings to make sure they remain safe for staff and students. Through a continual program of site inspections and testing we have identified 75 public schools with buildings that have lead paint.

We regularly check the condition of lead paint in our schools and take action if it has deteriorated, been damaged or disturbed.

To accurately test for lead a sample of the paint is sent to an accredited measurement lab. Analysis will determine the amount of lead contained in the paint, which provides important information on next steps to manage the paint.

Across our public schools lead paint is most typically found on painted timber surfaces including window frames, eaves and handrails. It has also been found in storage, plant and equipment rooms.

Lead paint management

There are four main strategies for managing lead paint*:

1. leave in place and monitor the condition
2. stabilise the paint
3. remove the paint, or
4. a combination of these options as required to keep the area safe.

The most appropriate course of action may not be removing the paint. Removing lead paint that is in good condition can produce lead dust which may increase the risk to our school community.

In most cases, lead paint can be stabilised by painting over the surface with a non-lead based paint. This is called encapsulation.

Managing lead paint in ACT public schools

The Education Directorate regularly checks and manages lead paint in our public school buildings. Our approach is informed by experts, including hazardous materials consultants, academics and health officials.

Every public school with known hazardous materials (e.g. lead or asbestos) has a Hazardous Materials Register. The Register is a collection of reports about what hazardous materials exist in the school, where they are, and how they are being managed. It is used by tradespeople doing maintenance or upgrades so they know where these materials are before they start work.

Registers are kept at a school's front office and are public documents.

Maintenance and upgrades are happening constantly in our public schools and no new work is done without painted surfaces first being assessed for lead paint. For example, before installing a new smart board the wall is assessed for lead paint and, if present, it is managed according to the strategies detailed above.

Only qualified or licensed contractors are allowed to remove lead paint. Any work that could disturb lead paint is done out of school hours. If it is major work, it takes place in the school holidays. This allows extra time for follow-up testing to ensure the area does not pose a risk for students and staff.

Regular painting is also undertaken in public schools. This makes sure existing lead paint is safely encapsulated.

The example on the next page shows how deteriorating lead paint on external windows and doors has been stabilised at one of our public schools using the encapsulation method.

*Adapted from Australian Standard on Hazardous Paint Management (ASNZS4361.2:2017)



Before stabilisation



After stabilisation

Lead paint and health

Lead can be harmful to the human body if it is swallowed or inhaled.

Children under five years of age face a greater hazard because they tend to put their hands on objects and into their mouths, they absorb a higher percentage of ingested lead than adults, and their brains are still developing so they are more susceptible to the effects of lead, even at low levels of exposure.

For this reason, the Education Directorate prioritises remediation work in preschools and primary schools.

One of the most important ways to reduce the potential of exposure is to make sure that children and young people wash their hands before eating.

Everyone should avoid unnecessary contact with lead – in their homes, communities and workplaces. Protective equipment should be used when performing activities like renovating or sanding painted surfaces which could expose lead paint or create lead dust.

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommends blood lead level testing for people suspected to have swallowed or inhaled lead from a particular source (more than the very small amounts that exist in most people's everyday environments), or if they have unexplained health problems that could be due to lead exposure.

If you or any members of your family have any health concerns, we recommend that you speak with your GP to ensure that proper health advice is provided for your specific circumstances.

More information

Further information about lead paint is available from:

- National Health and Medical Research Council <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/health-advice/environmental-health/lead-blood-levels>
- ACT Health <https://health.act.gov.au/about-our-health-system/population-health/fact-sheets> (choose Lead exposure and your health)
- New South Wales Environmental Protection Authority <https://www.epa.nsw.gov.au/your-environment/household-building-and-renovation/lead-safety>
- Safe Work Australia <https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/topic/lead>