



Child lead poisoning declines

Tess Hannapel, Times-News Intern

CUMBERLAND - Statistics from the Maryland Department of the Environment show a statewide decline in the percentage of elevated blood lead levels in children.

In 2006, 1,172 children from 0 to 6 years old were tested in Allegany County, an increase from the 1,037 tested in 2005. In 2005, 3.1 percent of the children tested had an elevated blood lead level of 10 micrograms per deciliter or higher. But in 2006, only 1.9 percent of the children tested at the elevated level.

Pamela Ronan, lead awareness coordinator at the Allegany County Health Department, said she thinks the number of prevalent cases in Allegany County is going down for a variety of reasons.

"First, we have tried to increase awareness through education," she said. "The medical field recognizes the prevalence of the problem. Second, the laws have changed and landlords are required by law to register property and to have it inspected by certified inspectors."

Ronan said some of the education programs Allegany County does include speaking to groups such as day care providers, educating the public at health fairs and talking with the schools' nurses.

Ronan said it's important for parents to know that sources of lead poisoning are not just in paint and to pay attention to recall notices posted in stores and pharmacy waiting areas. However, though the state is on a decline for elevated blood lead levels in children, Ronan doesn't think the statistics show the actual picture. Garrett County health officials agree that the statistics show an inaccurate picture.

This year, Garrett County children's elevated blood lead level increased from 0.8 percent to 1.0 percent.

Dr. William Pope, deputy health officer at the Garrett County Health Department, said these numbers are random and don't show who is being tested, such as the age, income level and risk of the child being tested.

"If the children who are getting the tests are the ones with the more educated parents or who have newer homes, then you'll be doing a lot of tests that are not high risks. However, tests on lower-income people in old homes with more exposure to lead paint will be more likely to find elevated levels that you want to be treated."

The number of children being tested has also dropped, with 495 children tested in 2006 compared to 532 tested in 2005.

Pope said this is due to whether or not the parents accept the test and if the doctors offer it.

"The test does require blood to be drawn and a lot of people don't like to take a toddler to have blood drawn," he said.

Pope said though the state statistics show an increase in prevalent cases and a decrease in number of children being tested, Garrett County is still lower than Allegany County's and the state's percentage of elevated blood-lead levels.

However, the Garrett County Health Department wants its residents to know it is still a problem since, like Allegany County, there is a high number of old buildings.

"With such a low rate of problems, people aren't aware their child could have a problem and just not be showing any signs," Pope said. "The whole health care system is directed toward symptoms - if they feel bad or hurt somewhere. People don't accept the need to draw blood on their child to check the lead levels."

Though both Allegany and Garrett County require all children to show evidence of a blood test for lead levels upon entry of school, this may be too late.

"With elevated levels of lead at age 5, much of the damage has been done," Pope said. "At age 1, kids are starting to get around and getting into lead exposures - this is the age we really need to focus on and make

sure to get them tested."

The Garrett County Health Department offers outreach programs, such as the Women, Infants and Children Program as well as Healthy Families.

Having a national mandate to end childhood lead poisoning by 2010, Ruth Ann Norton, executive director for the Coalition to End Childhood Lead Poisoning, said the prevalent cases are not going down as quickly as they should.

"The number are probably going down because education has been fairly widespread, people learning how to be careful and safe," she said. "However, the numbers aren't going down as quickly as they should - we really need to bring them down faster."

For more information on childhood lead poisoning risks, effects and prevention, or to view the statistics, visit the Coalition to End Childhood Lead Poisoning Web site at www.lead-safe.org or the MDE Web site at www.mde.state.md.us.

Copyright © 1999-2006 cnhi, inc.