I caught my child eating paint flakes off the door. Is he at risk for lead poisoning?

Lead is a poisonous heavy metal. It was a common ingredient in household paint until several decades ago. Thus old paint may still contain lead. Adverse health effects of lead exposure in children may include intellectual and behavioral deficits. In adults high blood pressure and kidney damage may occur.

Blood lead levels (BLL) in the general population have declined sharply over the past 30 years. This probably reflects, among other things, the removal of lead from petroleum products. Blood lead levels in children aged 1-5 years dropped drastically over a 15-year period (1976-1991). However, some children in low-income families continue to have higher levels. Blood lead levels remained higher in American Black children than in non-Hispanic, White, or Mexican-American children, as was shown in follow-up studies carried on from 1999 through 2002. It is estimated that 300,000 or more children are at risk in the United States.

Obviously great success has been achieved by removing lead from gasoline, food cans, and household paint products. But the problem has not been totally solved. It is estimated there are still some 24 million housing units with lead paint hazards.

We think it unlikely that a single ingestion of a flake of old paint would hurt a child. Nevertheless, if there is any possibility this has been an ongoing practice, it would not hurt to get their BLL measured.

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