

Houston Health

Summer 2004
Houston Department of
Health and Human Services



A Quarterly Newsletter for Advisory Councils of the Houston Department of Health and Human Services

Getting Back Home Safe

**An HDHHS program temporarily relocates families
of lead-poisoned children to renovate their contaminated homes**

An emergency phone call shortly after a routine check-up left 2-year-old Breanna McClendon's family feeling insecure in their own home.

The doctor on the line explained to Samantha Taylor that her daughter was suffering from lead poisoning, a condition that in children can result in learning disabilities, behavioral problems, mental retardation, speech and language handicaps and brain damage. Extremely high blood lead levels can trigger seizures, coma or even death.

After the doctor's unsettling call last November, the Houston Department of Health and Human Services (HDHHS) determined that the deteriorating paint on the Third-Ward home rented by the family contained lead. Taylor immediately also began fearing for 6-year-old son Marvin, but especially for Jason, 2 months old at the time, since elevated blood lead levels are particularly harmful to the developing brain and nervous system of fetuses and young children.

"It was shocking because I did not know that much about lead poisoning," Taylor said. "I wouldn't say it was so scary that I was paralyzed, but I definitely knew I had a big problem to solve."

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Two-year-old Breanna McClendon stands on the front porch of the lead-contaminated home renovated by the Lead Based Paint Hazard Control Program at the Houston Department of Health and Human Services. A check-up detected McClendon's lead poisoning, but her elevated blood lead levels have gradually decreased since the program performed the renovation in April.

Lead-reducing renovations end poisoning cycle

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Taylor couldn't bear the thought of Breanna being further exposed to the paint, but the home that she and her husband Derrick Harrison provided for their children was affordable and they did not want to uproot from their neighborhood. That's when HDHHS' Lead Based Paint Hazard Control Program stepped in, temporarily relocated the family and renovated the home.

In April, crews contracted by HDHHS installed vinyl siding on the home's exterior and replaced all the windows, removing the threat posed by the old, flaking lead paint.

"The job they did on the house is great," Taylor said. "The house just looks great. Even the (neighborhood) kids pass by and say, 'That is a pretty house.' The best part of all is that now my children are safe."

The home is one of the 947 houses that the program has remodeled – and made once again safe for families to occupy – since 1996. The program is close to reaching a milestone; sometime in September it will remodel its 1,000th house containing lead paint and home to a lead-poisoned young child.

The program has used funds from three federal grants to perform the lead hazard-reduction renovations. The program received its last grant, \$2.1 million from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, in early 2003. Bond funds from the city's Department of Housing and Community Development augmented the grant, bringing the total project value up to \$3.4 million.

Approximately 150 homes are currently on the remodeling waiting list and the program annually applies for grants that will permit renovation of additional houses.

Privately-owned or rental homes contaminated with lead and housing low-income children less than six



Samantha Taylor and her daughter Breanna McClendon, 2, walk out of the home that HDHHS renovated to contain lead hazards. The renovations included installing vinyl siding and replacing all windows.

years of age qualify for the renovations as long as they are within Houston city limits. The program targets inner-city neighborhoods, areas more likely to contain older homes with lead-based paint — the most common source of lead exposure in children.

Houston zip codes where children appear to be at much higher risk for lead poisoning are 77002, 77003, 77004, 77005, 77006, 77007, 77008, 77009, 77011, 77012, 77019, 77020, 77023, 77026, 77030 and 77098. They mostly comprise neighborhoods surrounding downtown.

Lead-reduction activities include removal and replacement of contaminated housing components, stabilizing or enclosing painted surfaces and temporarily relocating families during the renovation process to ensure that children are not further lead poisoned. The relocation, provided at no

cost to families, takes into consideration each household's school, employment and transportation needs.

"Our goal is to end the lead poisoning cycle," said Dr. Brenda Reyes, the program's administrator. "Low income families tend to move often as they search for houses within their means. The program creates a healthy environment for the family living in a lead-contaminated home and for the next family that will eventually move in."

As lead-based paint in older homes deteriorates, it creates contaminated dust as well as paint chips that can be eaten by young children, especially those between one and three years of age who frequently pick up objects and put them in their mouths. Home renovation or remodeling can disturb lead paint. Also, a

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Old, deteriorating lead paint poses greatest risk

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young child can easily chew on painted surfaces such as window sills and door frames in a lead-exposed home.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that more than 80 percent of all homes built before 1978 in the United States have lead-based paint in them. Houses built before 1950 pose the greatest hazard to children because they are much more likely to contain lead-based paint than newer homes. The older the house, the more likely it is to contain lead-based paint and a higher concentration of lead in the paint.

The main treatment for lead poisoning is to stop the exposure. Removing the lead from a child's environment helps to ensure a sustained decline in blood-lead levels. In some cases, medications can lower elevated blood-lead levels.

The longer children are exposed to lead, the greater the likelihood that they will sustain damage to their health. Lead can harm virtually every system in the human body, but it is especially damaging to the developing brain and nervous system of fetuses and young children. It can damage the kidneys and the reproductive sys-

tem and cause high blood pressure.

Private medical providers and HDHHS screened 27,082 Houston children for lead poisoning in 2002. A total of 876 children screened, or 3.3 percent, had blood lead levels equal to or greater than 10 micrograms per deciliter, the lowest level associated with adverse effects on a child. Nationwide, 2.4 percent of the children screened have elevated blood lead levels.

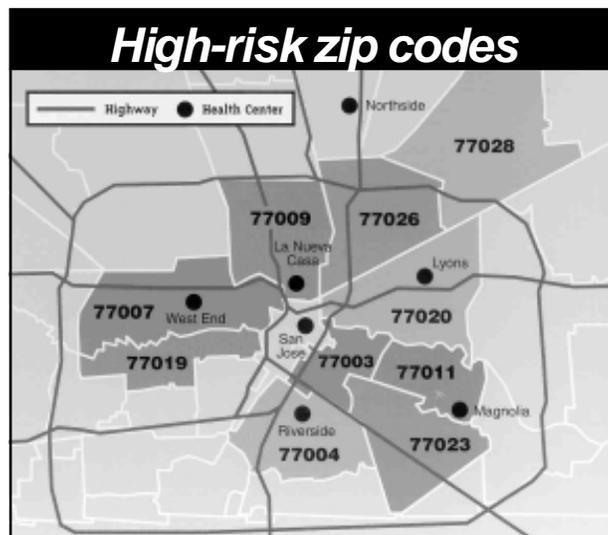
A blood test is the only method able to determine lead poisoning. Symptoms include headaches, irritability, abdominal pain, vomiting, anemia, weight loss, poor attention span, noticeable learning difficulty, slowed speech development, hyperactivity and muscle aches. Symptoms, however, do not develop in most children, and if so, they usually become apparent several years after the lead poisoning began or occurred.

Taylor never noticed any symptoms in Breanna, whose blood-lead level was at 37 micrograms per deciliter

when first discovered. Seven-month-old Jason will be tested about the time he reaches his first birthday, the earliest a lead test can be performed on a baby.

Taylor said her family's doctor told her there is a possibility that Breanna could have trouble keeping up in school or might have brain damage. Taylor remains optimistic since monthly doctor visits show Breanna's blood-lead levels are gradually decreasing.

"Now that her lead poisoning is going down we feel more secure," she said. "Things are definitely a lot better."



Lead hazards

Children can be harmed by lead by:

- Getting lead dust from old paint on their hands or toys and then putting their hands in their mouths
- Inhaling lead dust from old paint
- Eating chips of old paint or dirt that contain lead
- Drinking water from pipes lined or soldered with lead

Where can lead be found?

- Dust and paint chips from old paint
- Homes built before 1978, particularly those that are in need of repair or are in deteriorating

condition

- Soil that has lead in it
- Hobby materials such as stained glass, paints, solders, fishing weights and buckshot
- Folk remedies
- Workplace dust brought home on the clothing of people who have jobs that use lead
- Kitchen pottery such as ceramic dishes, especially if made in another country
- Older painted toys and antique furniture such as cribs
- Tap water in homes that have lead

pipes

- Mini-blinds manufactured outside the United States before July 1996.

Prevention — What You Can Do

- If your home was built before 1950, ask your pediatrician to test your child for lead.
- If your home was built before 1978, talk to your pediatrician or health department about safe ways to remodel before any work is done.

Source:

American Academy of Pediatrics

Houston's immunization rate records increase

Houston's immunization rate for children age 19 to 35 months improved almost 8 percent in 2003, according to an annual survey released in late July by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The city's immunization rate, although still considered low among the country's largest urban areas, increased to 69.2 percent in 2003 from 61.4 percent in 2002 – a 7.8 percent jump possibly due to vaccination campaigns targeting health care providers and emphasizing the importance of the fourth immunization visit recommended for children at 12 months of age.

"It appears that at least some of the educational messages have gotten through to some of the providers about doing simultaneous administration of all due vaccines," said David R. Miller, chief of the Immunization Bureau at the Houston Department of Health and Human Services (HDHHS).

Critical messages urge medical providers to take full advantage of all opportunities to vaccinate and seek to dispel the myths that children can't receive immunizations with a mild fever or that they can only receive one or two shots at a time.

The CDC recommends children receive 80 percent of the vaccinations they will need in their lifetime by age 2. Children are most susceptible to contagious and deadly diseases from birth to 2 years of age because they have yet to develop the antibodies necessary to fight off diseases. The vaccinations provide immunity before the child has been exposed to disease-causing bacteria or viruses.

Children, in a span of five visits to a doctor or a health

clinic, need to receive roughly 20 vaccinations before their second birthday. Some children receive as many as five vaccinations in a single visit. It is recommended that parents take an infant to the family's doctor or health clinic for immunizations at 2, 4, 6, 12 and 15 months of age.

The fourth visit is a major factor for Houston's low immunization rate. Many parents are prompt about keeping up with the first three immunization appointments while their children are in their infancy, but fail to show up for the fourth well-child visit, perhaps because of seeing the children older, already walking and stronger and neglecting

other vaccines until the start of school.

The delay results into a low coverage level for the fourth dose of the combined shot for diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis (whooping cough). While 92 percent of children surveyed receive at least three doses of the vaccine, only about 76 percent received at least four recommended doses, consequently diminishing the city's overall



Mary Wright, a nurse with the Immunization Bureau, vaccinates 4-year-old Michelle Escobar at Sharpstown Center during the summer immunization campaign. The Houston Department of Health and Human Services organizes immunizations at area shopping malls every year.

immunization rate to 69 percent.

Coverage levels in Houston for other immunizations are comparable to national averages. The nation's childhood immunization rate is 79 percent.

Public clinics provide about 15 percent to 25 percent of the immunizations for children in the Houston area. Private medical providers and health maintenance organizations, or HMOs, provide the rest. HDHHS has 19 immunization sites and Harris County Public Health and Environmental Services operates 17 sites. Approximately 750 private

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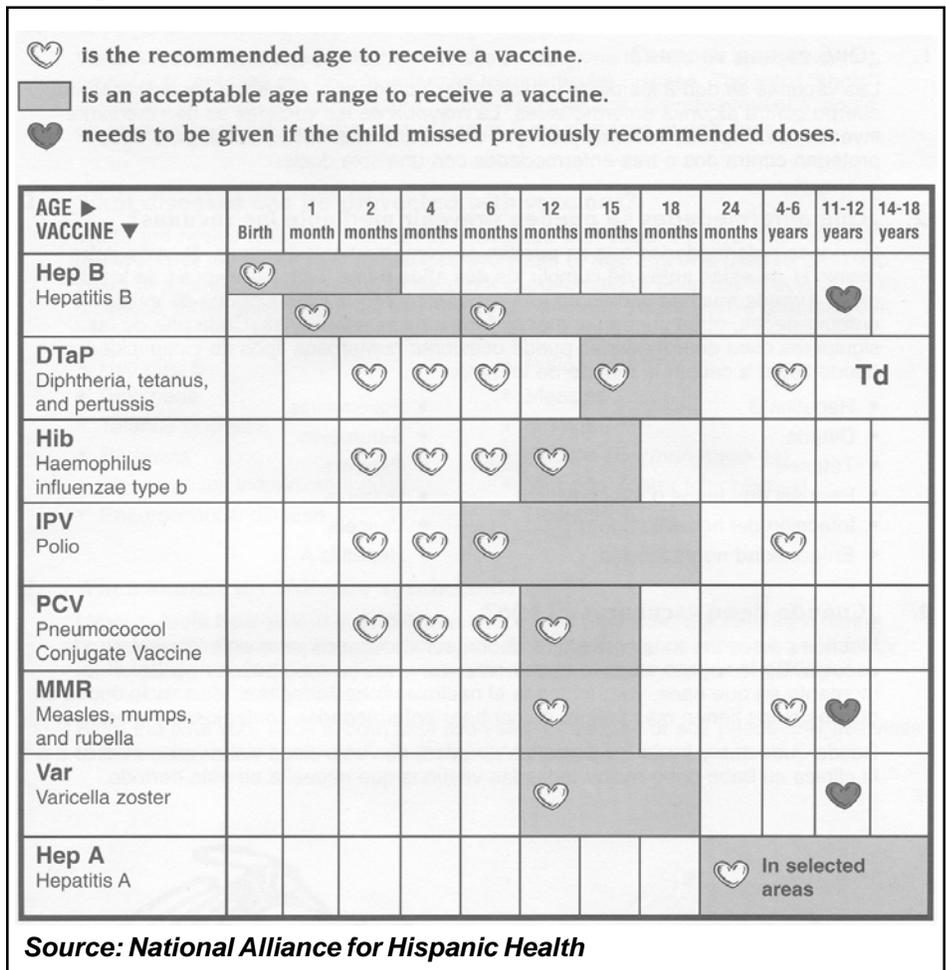
Immunizations safeguard children from diseases

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health care providers offer low-cost vaccines at 360 Houston sites through participation in the federal Vaccines for Children program, administered locally by HDHHS.

Immunizations help keep children safe from diseases that can cause premature deaths and an array of illnesses such as pneumonia, meningitis, seizures, paralysis, encephalitis, brain and liver damage, heart problems and blood, joints, bones and ear infections. They also protect the entire community by reducing the spread of viruses and bacteria that cause infectious diseases.

The diseases that can cause numerous disabilities or even the death of a child – and which immunizations easily prevent – are hepatitis B, diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (whooping cough), H. influenza type b, pneumococcal disease, polio, measles, mumps, rubella and varicella (chicken pox). They once were commonplace and each killed thousands of children in the United States.



Breast-feeding barriers reduce benefits to babies

Undue fears about production of breast milk, possible conflicts with work or daily schedules and nursing in public deter mothers from breast-feeding. But breast-feeding not only helps babies fight off illnesses, it also lowers women’s risks of certain breast and ovarian cancers.

Now a new picture of the impact those barriers have on breast-feeding has emerged as a result of a national survey that documents just how many mothers nurse and for how long.

Only 34 percent of Houston mothers breast-feed at least for the minimum recommended six months and their numbers decrease to 17 percent at 12 months, according to statistics compiled for the first time by the Centers for Disease Control

and Prevention. Seventy-two percent of Houston mothers have tried breast-feeding.

Houston breast-feeding rates mirror those for the entire state. The national average for mothers who exclusively breast-feed their babies for six months is 14 percent.

Breast milk is the healthiest food for an infant and changes to meet a baby’s nutritional needs. It contains antibodies to protect a baby from disease and helps prevent sudden infant death syndrome.

Research studies have shown breast-feeding increases a baby’s IQ, may improve vision and helps form healthy teeth and jaws. Breast-fed babies have fewer bouts of diarrhea, ear infections and respiratory

infections. Nursing mothers also burn more calories, making it easier for them to return to their pre-pregnancy weight.

As breast-feeding coordinator in the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program at the Houston Department of Health and Human Services, Judy Fraley encounters first hand many women’s lack of confidence when it comes to breast-feeding.

“Women worry that they will not be able to make enough milk or that they will be unsuccessful at breast-feeding just because they have heard of someone who was unable to breast-feed their baby,” Fraley said. “In fact, the majority of women can

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WIC program offers support to nursing mothers

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breast-feed. Even women who have had enhancement or reduction surgery can breast-feed.”

Babies may be fed nothing but breast milk for the first six months of life. Water, juice and other foods are generally unnecessary during this time.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that breast-feeding continue for at least 12 months, and thereafter for as long as mother and baby desire. The World Health Organization recommends continued breast-feeding up to 2 years of age or beyond.

Fraley said some new moms unnecessarily fear a loss of freedom, many having the misconception that they will need to have their babies with them at all times if they start breast-feeding or that nursing will interfere with work or daily schedules. However, women can use a pump to store breast milk and take care of most of an infant’s nutritional needs.

“Moms can nurse prior to leaving work, pump at work if possible and arrange for a day care close enough for a lunch hour visit,” Fraley said. “If necessary, formula can be given when mom needs to be away.”

Nursing mothers can store fresh breast milk in the refrigerator for five



Elizabeth Pineda, breast-feeding peer counselor with the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, shows new mom Maria Garcia how to position her week-old baby Crystal Agundis when nursing.

days, in the freezer for three to four months and in deep freeze for six months.

For moms embarrassed to breast-feed in public or even around family and friends, Fraley suggests throwing a blanket over a shoulder, tucking an infant under a loose fitting shirt or unbuttoning one or two buttons on a dress or shirt. “Women can breast-feed discreetly,” she said. “You don’t

have to remove any clothing.”

Prenatal education and early support provided by programs such as WIC help mothers overcome other breast-feeding barriers. The program provided nutritional education and nutritious foods to a record 77,380 people in 2003.

WIC’s goal is to reduce premature births, low birth weight, the fetal death rate and long-term medical expenses by targeting services to pregnant women, breast-feeding mothers, women who have given birth in the last six months and children up to age 5 who have nutritional health-related problems.

A single woman with an annual income of less than \$17,224 qualifies for WIC services as well as a family of four with an annual income of less than \$34,873.

For more information about breast-feeding support or WIC, call 713-794-9090.

Houston Health Newsletter

is published quarterly by the



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