



WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT Lead & Children with Developmental Delays and Disabilities

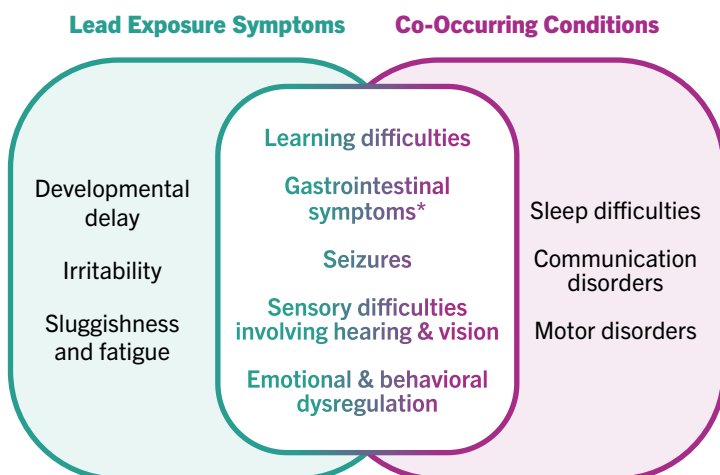
Understanding Increased Lead Exposure Risk

Lead is neurotoxic to developing brains, even at lower blood levels. Autistic children and children with developmental delays and disabilities may have sensory regulatory differences, including oral sensory-seeking behaviors past the chronological age of what is developmentally expected.

Oral sensory-seeking behaviors may include licking, biting, and chewing non-food items. These behaviors may also be consistent with pica and pica behavior, which is also higher in autistic children (23.2% prevalence) and children with developmental delays and disabilities (8.4% prevalence), compared to children without these conditions (3.5% prevalence).

Pica behavior may have medical consequences (*nutritional deficiencies, gastrointestinal parasites, etc.*). Behavior changes from baseline may signal an underlying medical cause such as lead exposure. Co-occurring medical conditions may overlap with signs and symptoms of lead toxicity.

Overlapping Signs and Symptoms of Lead Exposure and Co-Occurring Conditions in Children with Developmental Delays and Disabilities



*loss of appetite, feeding difficulties, weight loss, abdominal pain, vomiting, constipation

References on back

What Clinicians Can Do

- ✓ **Maintain a low index of suspicion** for lead exposure in children with sensory seeking behaviors and developmental differences
- ✓ **Ask for a thorough review of symptoms** when behaviors change and/or become unmanageable
- ✓ **Address** medical issues first
- ✓ **Utilize a systemic approach** to connect children and families to supports, including Early Intervention, school district programs
- ✓ After children and families are connected to systems, **consider individualized options for therapeutic support**
- ✓ **Follow and support** children and families over time
- ✓ **Advocate for policies** to decrease lead exposure and improve developmental and behavioral



Systemic Approach to Resource Navigation

- **Birth to 3 years of age: Early Intervention**
bit.ly/intervention-under-3
- **Three years of age and above: School-based services**
bit.ly/school-over-3
- **Behavioral supports: BEACON Portal**
beacon.illinois.gov
- **School navigation: Family Matters Parent Training Information Center**
fmpitc.org
- **IL Doc Assist**
illinoisdocassist.uic.edu

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4. Mayo Clinic Staff. Lead poisoning. Mayo Clinic. December 24, 2025. Accessed September 2, 2026. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/lead-poisoning/symptoms-causes/syc-20354717>