

# Getting the lead out with new regulations and updated resources

By Helena Bryan

With a low melting point, high pliability, and resistance to corrosion, lead has been used for centuries in water pipes, storage vessels, and protective coatings. But workers who may be scraping or sanding lead-based products need to watch out: their health may be at risk.

Lead-based paints and coatings are known for their durability, brightness, and quick-drying capacity. Before 1960, many house paints contained as much as 50 percent lead by weight. And lead-based paints are still being used in industrial and commercial buildings, and for the yellow markings on highways.

Clearly, lead has properties that make it industry-friendly. But when it comes to humans, it can be toxic — and deserves as much caution as other hazardous materials such as asbestos.

Like asbestos, lead isn't a problem until it's disturbed. Scraping or sanding sends lead dust airborne, where it can be inhaled. Lead settling on surfaces may get on the hands and be accidentally ingested. Once in the bloodstream, lead is stored in our bones. Continued exposure can lead to anemia, nerve damage, decreased brain function, kidney damage, and infertility.

Recent amendments to the Regulation, and a beefed up how-to manual, are meant to help prevent such adverse health effects in the 30,000 workers at risk of lead exposure in B.C.'s construction and manufacturing sectors.



Lead-based paints pose a health risk when disturbed. A risk assessment and exposure control plan are crucial elements for keeping your workers safe.

## New regulations

Effective May 1, 2017, employers looking to protect workers from the dangers of lead can find clearer guidance for doing so in the OHS Regulation (section 6.58–6.69).

“We’ve moved all the requirements associated with lead into one place in the Regulation,” says WorkSafeBC senior occupational hygienist Geoff Clark, a member of the internal working group that developed the changes. “It’s a one-stop-shopping experience now. And we’ve more clearly defined the processes for handling lead-containing products, much like we did with asbestos and biological agents a few years ago.”

The new Regulation also allows qualified persons to determine whether peer-reviewed research data may be used to estimate exposure and develop control plans — rather than requiring employers to monitor the air for lead.

“Because of the short-term nature of work on construction sites, and the length of time it takes to collect air samples, this will make a big difference to employers,” Clark says.

New requirements related to lead processes include the following:

- Warning signs must be posted where hazardous lead exposures could occur.

- Employers must create lead-free zones where employees can take coffee and lunch breaks.
- Employers must provide workers with facilities to wash and change.

“This is a step forward,” says Mike Kennedy, manager, Hazardous Materials and Construction at BC Housing, which develops, manages, and administers subsidized housing options across the province. “We support anything that makes our buildings safer for our tenants, the public, and our employees.”

To support the amended Regulation, an updated, more comprehensive lead book, called *Lead: Preventing Exposure at Work*, has been made available on [worksafebc.com](http://worksafebc.com). This practical resource includes updates to regulatory guidelines, detailed instructions on how to do a risk assessment and exposure control plan, tables allowing employers to use existing data to determine exposure control plans, and lots of other how-to's and samples. ☺

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—Geoff Clark, WorkSafeBC senior occupational hygienist



## Is this the right tool for the job?

- Assess the hazards before using a ladder
- Consider a safer alternative
- Develop and follow safe work procedures

For resources on ladder safety visit [worksafebc.com/health-safety](http://worksafebc.com/health-safety).

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