



# LEAD PAINT: STILL LURKING

Four years after landmark EPA law, safety remains a key issue. What you need to know if you own an older home.

by Paul F. Pogue

**YOU NEED TO REPLACE** the windows on your 50-year-old house. As an informed homeowner, you know that disturbing the paint in an older home may expose your family to lead poisoning, so you search for a knowledgeable contractor.

While interviewing candidates for the project, the last thing a consumer expects to hear is: “It’s just a bunch of B.S., really.” However, that’s exactly what one contractor told one of our Angie’s List reporters during “secret shopper” calls made to 150 randomly selected painters, remodelers and window contractors in 10 major cities. Sadly, our staff found that a significant number of those renovation contractors — nearly 11 percent — offered consumers bad advice when it comes to lead safety. But even more disconcerting, nearly 32 percent of those contractors told us they did not have the required EPA lead-safety certification.

With National Lead Poisoning Prevention Week set for Oct. 19-25 and the four-year anniversary of the EPA’s Renovation, Repair and Painting Rule just past, we decided to revisit lead-safety practices. The RRP requires any contractor who disturbs lead paint to become EPA-certified and follow strict protocol to minimize and contain lead dust during improvement projects on homes built before 1978. Although hardware stores have no legal responsibility to advocate safe work practices under the RRP, we included them

in the “secret shopper” calls because homeowners often seek advice from hardware store clerks before tackling a project. Nearly half of the 50 stores we contacted offered unsafe advice.

We also learned that the EPA lead certification isn’t fail-safe. “There’s a lot of guessing going on out there,” says Ron Peik, owner of A-rated Alpine Environmental, a lead-paint remediator in Chelmsford, Mass. “Just the fact somebody has an EPA number and they’re certified doesn’t guarantee you’ll get safe practices in your home.”

Every lead-painted wall contains an invisible poison, easily unleashed by scraping, sanding or melting the surface — common techniques in renovations. Lawmakers banned the substance for residential use in 1978, but contractors working with lead

**“It’s impacting us on every front, and people just don’t get it.”**

**Tamara Rubin, mother and founder of Lead Safe America Foundation**

paint operated with very little regulation until the EPA instituted the RRP in 2010. Federal law requires contractors to follow the RRP if they disturb more than 6 square feet of interior paint or 20 square feet of exterior paint. The basic principle requires them to



**Photo by Mark Wilson** | A crew with Alpine Environmental in Chelmsford, Mass., demonstrates proper lead containment on a home's exterior.

contain the area completely, allow no debris to escape, and clean up thoroughly when the job is done.

Nationwide, about 40 percent of the housing stock remains at risk for lead paint, according to

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Ron Peik, owner of Alpine Environmental

the EPA. That number of at-risk homes may be even higher for Angie’s List member households — 46 percent report that they live in a pre-1978 home. “A lot of people think it’s an inner-city problem,

and it’s not,” Peik says. “The outreach is happening, but slowly.”

Wendy Cleland-Hamnett, director of the EPA’s office of pollution prevention and toxics, says more homeowners now seem aware of the dangers if lead-safe work practices aren’t used. But in order to level the playing field for contractors following the law, the EPA needs to do more educational and outreach programs. “Our certified firms mentioned that they sometimes have to compete with firms underbidding jobs because that firm is uncertified and is willing to work without lead-safe work practices,” she says. “Those firms may be skirting other requirements as well.”

In the past year, Cleland-Hamnett says the EPA stepped

up its enforcement efforts against noncompliant firms or individuals. In February, the EPA announced that it fined 35 companies a total of \$274,000 for failing to get the required certification, follow lead-safe work practices and/or ensure their subcontractors followed RRP standards. In April, the EPA also socked Lowe’s Home Centers with the largest fine thus far — \$500,000 for violations in record keeping and work practice standards. Lowe’s agreed to a corporate-wide compliance program to ensure that contractors it hires to perform work for its customers comply with the RRP rule, the EPA says.

The Lowe’s settlement represents the EPA’s effort to go after high-impact cases that have ripple effects across industries, says Jennifer Colaizzi, a press officer with the EPA. “With Lowe’s insisting on compliance by its contractors, this will benefit families across the country,” she says. Calls to Lowe’s corporate office were not returned before press time.

At Angie’s List, any contractor who’s required to obtain EPA lead certification but fails to do so will be excluded from member searches by category or keyword.

Brandi Crawford, a homeowner in Kalamazoo, Mich., learned firsthand that EPA certification is no guarantee for safety. Following lead remediation at her home by an EPA-certified contractor, Crawford says her yard and 114-year-old home

## KNOW THE RISKS

Lead paint lurks in nearly half the nation’s homes. Here are several risk factors to consider, according to the EPA and highly rated lead testers:



About 38 million homes in the U.S., representing 40 percent of the residential housing stock, contain lead-based paint.



Any home built before 1978 might still have lead paint. And the chances increase the older the home.



Window and door frames often contain lead even when the rest of the house doesn’t, and they present particular dangers. Friction or impact surfaces such as door frames, stairs and windows can break down the paint during normal use and release lead into the home. Some ceramic tile in pre-1978 homes also contains lead, which might be released if the tiles are removed or broken.



Deteriorated paint presents a significant hazard, as it releases paint chips and lead dust. Even small amounts of dust — not just chips — can easily be ingested by young children.



Soil can become contaminated when exterior lead paint flakes or peels off.



**“It’s a nightmare. That’s what happens when you use unsafe work practices.”**

Brandi Crawford, shown with her 9-year-old son

come out, we’ll be successful in defending the claim,” he says.

Brandi says she works diligently to keep the home clean and won’t allow anyone into the yard, since she can’t afford the \$200,000 another contractor told her would be required to thoroughly remove the lead. “It’s a nightmare,” she says. “That’s what happens when you use unsafe work practices.”

Although the RRP says companies can be fined up to \$37,500 per violation, contractors say EPA enforcement continues to be spotty. “Hiring an EPA-certified renovation firm ... is the only way to be sure the firm is aware of the rule and all of its requirements for protecting the public,” Colaizzi says. “However, continued oversight by federal, state and local governments, and in particular by consumers, is still needed.”

So the most important thing owners of pre-1978 homes can do is hire certified contractors on jobs that disturb lead paint, and verify that the contractor follows the law. “Correct practices are very easy to spot,” Peik says. “You should be seeing lots of plastic being set up to contain the area, literally taped down so air doesn’t get in, and windows, ducts and doorways sealed off. Homeowners really should insist on looking at the containment before actual work is executed.”

Jeff Van Slooten, owner of highly rated Lead Detective Agency in Sacramento, Calif., says he learned

# 40%

Approximate percentage of homes in the United States containing lead-based paint, which was banned in 1978. The older the home, the more likely it contains lead.

**1 in 4**  
homes built  
between  
1960-1978



**7 in 10**  
homes built  
between  
1940-1960



**9 in 10**  
homes built  
before  
1940





**Photo by Ron Nability** | Jeff Van Slooten, owner of Lead Detective Agency in Sacramento, Calif., uses an XRF analyzer to test a home for lead.

about lead poisoning the hard way when he accidentally exposed his 9-year-old son to it while stripping a door. Fortunately, his son, who's now 27, had passed the age when lead poses the most risk to the brain.

Now working as a lead inspector, Van Slooten tests houses and soil for lead by using an X-ray fluorescence (XRF) analyzer, a handheld tool that costs \$17,000 to \$25,000 and requires specialized training. He checks hundreds of surfaces within a house, charging between \$300 and \$600. Van Slooten also conducts clearance evaluations by taking dust-wipe samples around the home and getting them tested by a lab. While the RRP rule requires no clearance test, Van Slooten and many other

experts highly recommend getting one. He typically charges about \$300 to perform one. "I wish more people were aware of it, but this is a tall mountain to climb," he says.

Though enforcement, regulations and education all play a role, nearly every expert we interviewed echoed the same sentiment: Change happens most quickly when homeowners and parents demand it. Tamara Rubin, who started the Lead Safe America Foundation, agrees. "Until parents realize the impact lead has had on our overall society, the change isn't going to happen," she says. "There's a profound link between lead, crime, special education and health care. It's impacting us on every front, and people just don't get it." ☞

## LEAD-SAFE CHECKLIST

If you own a home that predates 1978, think twice before planning any remodeling, painting or window-replacement project. The contractor you hire needs to be EPA lead-certified if the job disturbs more than 6 square feet of interior paint or 20 square feet of exterior paint.

### Follow this checklist to protect your family:

Confirm the firm's EPA certification, and request proof that at least one person supervising your project completed certified training.

Before any work begins, the contractor must provide you the EPA's "Renovate Right" lead hazard pamphlet.

Once the job starts, the contractor must completely contain the work area in plastic sheeting. Doors, windows and heating/cooling vents should be sealed off.

Pets and non-workers must be prevented from entering area.

For exterior jobs, plastic sheeting must extend at least 10 feet in all directions from the point where paint is disturbed. If the work takes place within 10 feet of the property line, extra precautions must be used to protect neighbors.

Any grinding, scraping or sanding must be done with tools equipped with a shroud and

HEPA vacuum attachment. Wet sanders and misters should be used to minimize dust.

No open-flame burning or torching is allowed, and heat guns cannot be used at temperatures higher than 1,100 degrees.

The contractor must clear the work site daily by using a HEPA vacuum to clean all dust and debris and wet-wipe and wet-mop all surfaces.

Make sure the contractor doesn't track lead dust away from the work area. They should wear disposable shoe covers and outer clothing and vacuum all personal items leaving the work area. All debris must be secured in plastic sheeting or heavy-duty plastic bags and disposed of off-site.

If local rules allow, water used for cleanup should be filtered and dumped in a toilet.

### MORE AT [ANGIESLIST.COM/LEAD](http://ANGIESLIST.COM/LEAD)

- Find out which companies faced EPA enforcement actions, as well as exclusion from searches on Angie's List, for not obtaining required lead certification.
- Learn what's involved for a contractor or firm to become certified and how to check.
- Know your rights as a homebuyer or renter before signing a contract to purchase or lease an older house.

