Lead, Water and Pregnancy: The Facts

A statement issued by the MotherToBaby Public Affairs Committee

Recently, the issue of lead in drinking water has become a topic of great concern nationally. While there is much news coverage of this issue and of the experts working toward ensuring that these communities have safe drinking water, there has been very little data reported or resources identified specifically for women who are pregnant or breastfeeding.

Here is what we do know: Lead can get into your body through the gut if you swallow or inhale tiny particles of paint chips, medications, soil, water, or other items that contain lead. Because lead is naturally found in many places in the environment, most people have small amounts of lead in their blood and do not usually experience problems. When a person is exposed to lead over a long period of time or at a high level, the body will store lead in the bones and teeth. Lead can stay in the bones and teeth for many years. During pregnancy and breastfeeding, lead can leave bone and move back into the bloodstream. A blood lead test can be done to see how much lead is present in the blood. Although most people will have some lead in their blood, levels greater than 10 micrograms per deciliter (µg/dl) indicate that there is some exposure at home or in the workplace that needs to be addressed. While there is no clear safe level of lead in the body, the goal is to have the lowest level possible. Women who had exposure to lead in the past should have levels checked before and during pregnancy. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that public health actions (such as a search for the source of the lead) be initiated when blood lead levels are above 5 µg/dL. Lead can cross into the baby starting at about the 12th week of pregnancy. The amount of lead in the blood of the mother and baby are almost the same, as are the levels in breast milk. Lead may also be found in infant formulas prepared at home, particularly if the local water supply contains high levels of lead. A mother should not stop breastfeeding unless her blood lead levels are above 5 µg/dL. Be sure to talk to your health-care provider about all your choices for breastfeeding.

Questions? Call 866.626.6847 | Text 855.999.3525 | Email or Chat at MotherToBaby.org.

Disclaimer: MotherToBaby Fact Sheets are meant for general information purposes and should not replace the advice of your health care provider. MotherToBaby is a service of the non-profit Organization of Teratology Information Specialists (OTIS). Copyright by OTIS, April 7, 2016.