

As you are putting away your holiday decorations, please take precautions to avoid exposure to lead, a powerful neurotoxin which can be in such seemingly harmless items as strings of electric lights, and artificial Christmas trees.

Have you ever noticed the “Proposition 65” label on packages of lights? It says: “WARNING: Handling the coated electrical wire of this product exposes you to lead, a chemical known to the state of California to cause cancer, birth defects or other reproductive harm. Wash hands thoroughly after use.”

The wires of both new and old lights contain lead. In fact, lead content is common in the PVC (polyvinyl chloride) plastic coating of electric cords of all types. But the warnings are only mandated on wires that are handled extensively, as are holiday lights.

In 2006, manufacturers that sell to Europe and Japan will be expected to be lead-free, but no such legislation is on the horizon in the U.S. Although some American companies are voluntarily manufacturing products such as extension cords and computer mouse cords without lead, currently there are no lead-free holiday lights on the market.

Newly published research points to artificial Christmas trees as another potential source of lead. The Environmental Quality Institute of the University of North Carolina at Asheville (www.unca.edu/eqi/), found enough lead in some artificial trees, especially those about 10 years and older, to pose a health hazard. Young children are at greatest risk because they are most likely to touch branches with their hands or mouths, or to play under the tree where contaminated dust may fall.

Not all artificial trees contain lead. To receive a test kit for determining if yours does, send a check for \$17 made out to EQI, and mailed to: Environmental Quality Institute, CPO#2331, UNC-Asheville, Asheville, NC 28804. The institute will analyze your sample and send you the results.

Luckily, exposure to these sources of lead is much easier to deal with than lead in plumbing pipes and house paint. But danger from lead is cumulative, so all sources should be avoided, especially by children.

Research shows that even low levels of lead exposure can cause irreversible reductions in a child's IQ. It can also impair hearing and growth, reduce attention span, and cause hyperactivity and behavioral problems which can lead to learning problems in school.

To be safe, minimize your handling of Christmas lights and artificial trees. Don't eat while you are putting them up or taking them down, wash your hands with soap and water afterward, and keep small children away.

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