



MELTING LEAD TO MAKE FISHING SINKERS IS VERY DANGEROUS!

What is the Problem?

Along its long coastline, as well as its rivers and lakes, many South Africans practice fishing for commercial, subsistence and recreational purposes. Fishing, as well as diving, often involves the melting of lead to make sinkers or weights. Unfortunately, many people melt lead without realizing that it can cause serious contamination of the environment. The practice is also highly hazardous to the health of those melting lead, as well as their families and friends. Studies undertaken by the Medical Research Council have shown that far too many children in South African fishing villages have lead poisoning.

How is the problem caused?

- When lead is melted, fine, poisonous particles are formed, that can travel long distances and remain in the environment for a very long time;
- Lead vapour may easily be inhaled, and transported through the bloodstream to the brain and other organs;
- Lead particles can settle on the soil, clothing, skin and hair, toys, tables and other furniture, as well as in house dust. These lead particles can remain long after lead melting activities are completed. Over time, fine lead particles may be ingested through the hand-to-mouth pathway.

How does lead cause harm to children?

Children are at particularly high risk of exposure to lead because they tend to put toys, sticks, stones or other items, which may be coated with lead dust, into their mouths. Some children have a condition called pica, which is a habit of eating non-food items such as soil, paint, cigarette butts or matchsticks. Children also spend a considerable amount of their time playing on the ground, and in this way, get exposed to much more lead in soil and dust, than adults.

High blood lead levels can cause the following health and social effects:

- lowered IQ;
- learning difficulties, especially in reading and mathematics;
- hyperactivity and difficulty in concentrating;
- hearing loss;
- anaemia ("weak" blood that can cause tiredness and shortness of breath) and abnormal growth;
- Permanent muscle paralysis, brain damage, coma and death may result, at very high levels of exposure.



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What you can do to prevent lead poisoning in yourself and your family

- Most importantly, try not to melt lead at all.
- If possible, try to make use of safer, non-lead sinkers, such as made from tin, tungsten, steel or bismuth;
- If it is essential for you to melt lead, take care to do so in a safe place. Do not melt lead inside your home or in a place where children play;
- Children should be kept away while lead is being melted;
- Ensure that children's toys are kept well away from places where lead is melted;
- Work in a well-ventilated area;
- Keep your work area clean, and use water with soap or another detergent to clean dust off work surfaces, walls and floors;
- Protective clothing, such as certain types of dust masks and gloves, may help reduce exposure to lead;
- After melting lead, wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water;
- Remove the clothing and shoes worn while melting lead, and wash them separately from other clothing. Do not take clothing worn while melting lead, inside the home;
- Shower or take a bath after melting lead, and clean the bath or shower cubicle thoroughly before anyone else makes use of it;
- Store your lead fishing sinkers, as well as all equipment and utensils used to melt lead, out of reach of children;
- Never put a lead sinker in your mouth;
- Keep the house clean by using soapy water to mop floors, rather than sweeping with a dry broom. Similarly, dust the house, especially the windowsills, with a cloth soaked in soapy water, rather than with a dry cloth or duster;
- Keep your, and especially your children's, fingernails short and clean;
- Wash your child's hand as often as possible, especially before eating and after playing in sandy or dusty areas;
- Do not melt lead close to sites where fruit or vegetables are grown;
- Wash all fruit and vegetables thoroughly before eating;
- Gently discourage your children from chewing their nails, or putting their hands or non-food items in his/her mouth.



If you are concerned that you or a child may have lead poisoning, speak to your doctor about a blood lead test.

