

Activists, community groups test for lead

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Erica Tunnell's house in the Overbrook section of the city was swarmed Saturday by environmental activists, students, and public-health experts.

Tunnell had asked to have her home checked from top to bottom through a program run by community groups, the city, and others seeking to combat the public-health risk of lead contamination.

"I'm very concerned about this," Tunnell said as testers wiped surfaces in the home to check for lead. "I don't want to be poisoned."

The day began at the Overbrook Environmental & Arts Education Center, where residents had been invited to bring soil samples. Professor Rich Pepino, a public-health expert at the University of Pennsylvania, was on hand with students to do the testing. As it turned out, the recent heavy rains meant that the soil was too wet for accurate testing, so Pepino scheduled home visits to take soil samples once the ground dries. The testing program is the work of the city Water Department, the Clean Water Action Fund, Penn, and others.

After assembling at the center, the group boarded a school bus to visit several homes.

Maurice M. Sampson II, eastern Pennsylvania director of the Clean Water Action Fund, said the main purpose of the program was to raise public awareness about the risks of lead and the relatively uncomplicated steps residents can take to detect its presence. Simple techniques such as the use of wipes and swabs that pick up lead were demonstrated Saturday. In some instances, Sampson said, the fix is simple. Covering soil in a contaminated yard with a layer of mulch or simply ensuring that children don't play in lead-infused soil can go a long way toward limiting the hazard.

Similarly, painted surfaces that contain lead can be made safe simply by applying a new coat of paint. If the paint is flaking, however, Sampson warned that it should not be touched and the problem should be left to experts.

Source: <http://www.philly.com/philly/news/activists-community-groups-test-for-lead-20170624.html>

“Today we want to take people out and show them how tests are done, to do outreach and workshops,” Sampson said.

In a recent [Inquirer and Daily News investigation](#), exposed soil in 114 locations in city river wards was tested — and in nearly three-quarters of the sites, hazardous levels of lead were found. Even small amounts of lead exposure in children can lower intelligence and result in poor academic performance, aggressive behavior, and hyperactivity, according to health officials. In adults, even low exposure over time can result in organ damage, memory loss, and depression. Much of the contamination is from lead smelters, most of them no longer in operation. At one time, Philadelphia had 36 smelters — more than any other city in America. Fourteen alone operated in these river wards.

For a variety of reasons, lead poisoning in the city is concentrated in poor neighborhoods, but the problem also can impact the affluent. The newspapers’ investigation found significant lead contamination in booming Kensington, where a plethora of construction projects is churning up soil, unearthing long-dormant lead dust.

One significant problem, said Sampson, is that homeowners in affected neighborhoods typically don’t trust the city bureaucracy. Even though the city offers, during major street-repair projects, to replace lead pipes connecting homes with city water mains, many homeowners simply refuse. Sampson said he and others in the program hope to get the word out to homeowners that it is in their best interest to accept the offer.