

CRANKY CONSUMER

Scouring the Home for Lead Paint

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The federal government banned the sale of lead-based paint more than a quarter-century ago, so why is it still turning up in so many homes, from multimillion-dollar mansions to \$500-a-month rental units?

The government estimates that some 24 million homes in the U.S. still contain potentially harmful levels of lead paint. The old paint, which in many cases has never been removed, can easily get stirred up during a home renovation.

Exposure to high lead concentrations can damage the brain and nervous system -- children and pregnant women are particularly vulnerable.

Some cities and states are actively addressing this threat. In February, New York City passed a law requiring landlords to remove lead paint and dust from pre-1960 apartments, while Michigan has its own legislation in the works. And last fall, the federal government announced a \$147 million initiative that includes trying to better identify lead hazards.

Meanwhile, homeowners face a bewildering array of lead-paint testing options, including do-it-yourself kits for \$10 or \$20 and far-pricier services that use X-ray devices and lab analysis.



Do-it-yourself kits are cheaper than some of the alternatives, but not 100% accurate.

Having just finished renovating an apartment in a nearly century-old building, we wanted to see if any lead dust was lingering. We tried five different methods, from the home kits to two approaches recommended by the Environmental Protection Agency, dust-wipe sampling and something called X-Ray Fluorescence (XRF) testing. For help analyzing the results, we consulted Rebecca Morley of the National Center for Healthy Housing, which advocates for greater awareness of the risks of lead poisoning in kids.

Help was exactly what we needed. During the course of the testing, we stained our walls, stunk up our apartment, and got

widely conflicting results, all the way from a clean bill of health to a stern warning to arrange a cleanup that we were told could cost thousands of dollars. One moral from our adventure: If you choose the full-service option, bargain. The rep we spoke with at JLC Environmental Consultants quoted us \$550 to dust-wipe eight rooms. When we asked for a better price, he lopped off \$100. The big sticker shock, however, came when his report arrived. It said that almost

half the samples exceeded federal government guidelines and recommended hiring "a certified lead contractor to clean the apartment." We called the rep, who tried to reassure us this would cost "well south of \$10,000." (After talking with Ms. Morley, we decided to pursue a lower-tech option: asking our regular cleaning person to do periodic cleanups where lead dust was identified.) Ms. Morley compares the do-it-yourself kits to home pregnancy tests: not 100% accurate, but helpful for figuring out if you need more thorough testing. Lead Detective, one of the kits we tried, warns that the clear-colored liquid may discolor the wall and advises customers to "use a paint chip or work carefully." We tried to slice off a bit of paint with the kit's razor, but managed only to shave off dust. When we applied the liquid -- after mixing two vials -- sure enough a stain appeared. (The results were negative.) But worse was the smell: a sulfur odor reminiscent of a stink bomb.

Lead Inspections, a more-expensive option, turned out to be our best experience. The technician, who used a hand-held XRF testing device, gave us a short tutorial on lead hazards. (Sample: Lead paint is only a threat if it is exposed.) He also offered simple steps to remedy "high-friction areas," or places where paint deterioration is likely.

Of the home kits, LeadCheck was the easiest to use because the Q-tip-like swabs contain the test liquid. We dabbed the floor and then waited about 30 seconds to see if it turned pink or red. (It didn't.)

With EMSL Analytical Inc., the homeowner takes the dust-wipe samples and sends them to the company's labs. The report we received lacked any explanation on deciphering the readings. Ms. Morley also questioned the way we had done the testing -- instead of carefully marking out the one-square-foot area to be wiped, we eyeballed it. Though we had asked the company when we signed up for guidance on conducting the test, it hadn't offered any. In response, the company says it deals mainly with professional testers.

Write to cranky@wsj.com

Our Results

Company/Price: JLC Environmental Consultants Inc.; jlcenvironmental.com;
\$450 for three dust samples in every room

How Test Works: Technician visits home and collects three dust samples from every room

Ease of Use: Report was thankfully free of jargon

Snafu: Technician forgot to take sample from hallway. JLC offered to have him return

Comment: Focuses on the presence of lead dust, which makes it best for postrenovation testing

Company/Price: LeadCheck; homaxproducts.com*; \$7.99

How Test Works: Rub end of finger-size swab over spot or object to be tested

Ease of Use: Swab tip instantly changes color if lead is found

Snafu: Not practical for testing a big house, as swab can be applied only to a small area

Comment: Can be used on various surfaces other than a painted wall, like ceramics and toys

Company/Price: The Lead Detective; healthgoods.com; \$27.95

How Test Works: Mix contents of two vials and apply liquid to painted surface

Ease of Use: Kit comes with razor to chip paint from wall, but we got only dust

Snafu: Wound up staining our wall with the liquid. (Kit warned that might happen)

Comment: More cumbersome than some of the other kits

Company/Price: EMSL Analytical Inc.; emsl.com; \$150 for analysis of 3 dust samples

How Test Works: You collect dust samples using baby wipes, then send to EMSL for analysis

Ease of Use: Report lists results in cryptic notations without any explanation

Snafu: Sales rep didn't detail wiping procedure, which may have affected our results

Comment: Consumers new to the field of dust sampling may quickly be in over their heads

Company/Price: Lead Inspections; (888) 532-3973; \$350 for XRF testing also included 6 dust samples)

How Test Works: Technician uses X-ray device to ping walls in search of lead

Ease of Use: Technician provided a helpful primer on lead-paint dangers

Snafu: Inspector was 15 minutes late for the appointment

Comment: XRF testing focuses on lead paint that is embedded in the wall rather than dust

*You can't buy LeadCheck from the company's Web site; we bought it at a local hardware store.