

Arsenic and Lead Contamination in Oklahoma Soils

Arsenic and lead are naturally occurring elements present in rocks. As the rocks erode, arsenic and lead enter into soils, waters and plants. According to the United States Geological Survey (USGS), the average arsenic concentration in soils for the 48 contiguous States is 7.4 parts per million (ppm) and 7.2 ppm in the western United States.⁽¹⁾ In central Oklahoma soils, the background arsenic concentration ranges from 0.6 to 21 ppm.⁽²⁾ The USGS reports the average lead concentration is 13 ppm in soils for central Oklahoma⁽²⁾ and 18 ppm for the western United States.⁽³⁾

Pollution from historic lead and zinc smelters in Oklahoma left residues of lead, arsenic and cadmium in area soils. Contamination was also spread by using smelter debris as fill material and for construction of driveways and roads. These former smelters were primarily located in eastern Oklahoma.

Some arsenic contamination above naturally occurring levels is also attributed to agricultural, energy and industrial practices. For example, arsenic-containing insecticides and herbicides were widely used on vegetables, fruits and field crops from the 1900s to around 1950. Coal combustion, wood preserving and smelting operations are also known to be sources of arsenic contamination.⁽¹⁾

Lead was once commonly used in paint and for plumbing. It was an additive to gasoline for many years and has also been found in ceramics, mini-blinds and other products. Homes built before 1970 commonly have lead-based paint. Renovation activities and peeling or flaking paint can release lead inside the home. Identification and cleanup of lead-based paint and dust associated with lead-based paint in the home are the responsibility of the homeowner. The use of lead in products in the United States has been phased out over the years but it is still used in some industrial applications. It is not uncommon to find lead in urban settings from a variety of sources.

Lead can enter the body by swallowing lead-containing particles in paint, soil, dust, food or similar sources. The only way to detect lead exposure is to have a blood lead test. The Centers for Disease Control have set a level of concern for levels of lead in blood for children under 6 years old.⁽⁴⁾ The Oklahoma State Department of Health (OSDH) can provide information on the health effects of lead in children and how to have a child tested for lead.⁽⁵⁾ Contact the OSDH Oklahoma Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program at **(405) 271-6617**.



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Neither the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) nor the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) have established regulatory cleanup levels for arsenic or lead in Oklahoma soils. The EPA, however, develops screening numbers for contaminants in soil, including arsenic and lead.⁽⁶⁾ These screening levels are concentrations that correspond to very low levels of risk. They are used as indicators of potential problems that generally require further investigation. Screening numbers are not the same as cleanup levels. DEQ and EPA set cleanup numbers based on site-specific modeling to protect human health.⁽⁷⁾

For additional information, please contact DEQ's Land Protection Division at **(405) 702-5100**.⁽⁸⁾

References:

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4. CDC Blood Lead Reference Value website, 2022 <https://tinyurl.com/3pkcc9zn>
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6. EPA, Regional Screening Levels, 2022 <https://tinyurl.com/yc4k7mh>
7. DEQ, Risk-Based Decision Making for Site Cleanup Factsheet, 2023 <https://tinyurl.com/2jv66cd3>
8. DEQ Land Protection Division Website <https://oklahoma.gov/deq/divisions/land-protection.html>

