

News Release

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For Immediate Release

Contact: Diana Garcia, Program Manager, 308-345-4223

New Lead Testing Services for Young Children

Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department (SWNPHD) is pleased to announce a new service for families in the region: free capillary blood lead level testing for children ages 1 to 5 years old. This testing is now available by appointment at SWNPHD offices in McCook and Ogallala.

A *capillary blood test* is a simple screening that uses a quick finger prick to collect a small sample of blood. It is an effective way to screen for lead exposure in young children.

“Many homes in our region were built before 1978 and may still contain lead-based paint, putting children at risk of exposure,” said Diana Garcia, Program Manager at SWNPHD. “In fact, according to recent data from DHHS, at least 1 in 4 of all homes in southwest Nebraska were built before 1978.”

According to census data, the 2023 population report listed 2,485 children aged 6 and under living in southwest Nebraska. Of that total, only 134 children from the district were screened for lead. That is only 5% of all eligible children. While the number of children being tested has been improving, there are still many children not being tested.

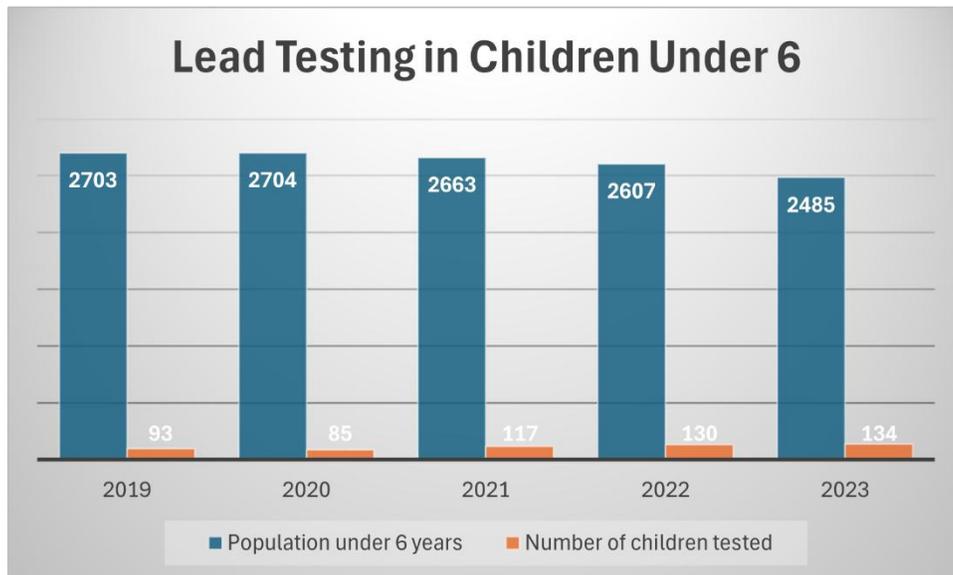


Table 1: Comparison of US Census data and NDHHS lead testing data

“We’re in a very rural area with limited access to capillary testing, so offering this service locally and free of charge is a crucial step in protecting the health of our youngest residents,” continued Garcia.

Continuous lead exposure in young children is especially dangerous because their developing bodies absorb lead more easily and are more vulnerable to its harmful effects. Even low levels of lead in the blood can cause serious, irreversible damage over time. Here is a breakdown of the key dangers:

- **Brain Development:**
 - Decreased IQ
 - Learning disabilities
 - Speech delays
 - Trouble focusing or sitting still
- **Growth and Physical Health:**
 - Slowed growth
 - Hearing loss
 - Kidney damage
 - Anemia (Low iron)
- **Long-Term Effects:**
 - Behavioral issues (aggression, impulsiveness)
 - Poor academic performance
 - Higher risk of chronic disease in adulthood.

Because lead poisoning often presents no immediate symptoms, regular screening is the only way to detect lead and prevent long-term harm. SWNPHD will offer lead screening at their McCook and Ogallala locations during regular business hours. Appointments are required for both testing locations.

In line with CDC recommendations, any child whose capillary test result is above 3.5 micrograms per deciliter ($\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$) will be referred to their primary care provider for a follow-up *venous blood test*, which involves drawing blood from a vein for more accurate measurement.

For more information about lead or to schedule an appointment, call SWNPHD at 308-345-4223. Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department serves Chase, Dundy, Frontier, Furnas, Hayes, Hitchcock, Keith, Perkins, and Red Willow counties. You can follow SWNPHD on Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram or view the website at www.swhealth.ne.gov which contains many resources and additional information helpful to prevent disease, promote and protect health.

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