

Script – Print – Should I Worry About Mercury and Lead Poisoning?

HGTV star Christina Hall recently revealed she has been diagnosed with mercury and lead poisoning.

Hall shared that it was likely caused “from all the gross houses,” she worked on while filming “Flip or Flop,” the home renovation series she hosted with her ex-husband Tarek El Moussa for 10 years.

So, what is mercury and lead poisoning and how common of a problem is it?

“Mercury and lead are both elements,” says Dr. Dipti Sabharwal, a family practice physician for OSF HealthCare. “There’s usually none to almost trace amounts present in our body. But when these levels are present in higher levels than normal, then that’s what causes the toxicity or poisoning.”

When you were going to school, you may have developed the belief that if you got poked with a lead pencil you would get lead poisoning, but this is actually an urban legend as lead pencils don’t actually contain lead. Lead poisoning is caused by exposure to high levels of lead and is commonly found in houses built before 1978.

Mercury is found in the air, water and soil and may have toxic effects on the nervous, digestive and immune systems, as well as on lungs, skin and eyes.

Experts say that everyone is exposed to some level of mercury with most people exposed to low levels, often through ongoing or long-term contact. However, some people are exposed to high levels of mercury. It depends on the type of mercury, the dose, the person’s age, the duration of exposure, and whether the exposure was inhaled, ingested or contacted by skin.

Mercury and lead poisoning has the greatest impact on those working in manufacturing, chemical and mining industries. It’s also possible to develop mercury poisoning from eat too much fish containing mercury such as marlin and swordfish.

Hall believes she developed mercury and lead poisoning from renovating older homes, where she was around old paint and inhaling dust and powders from tearing down walls.

“That’s why people who have hobbies or as work to renovate houses, there is a higher risk of exposure to lead,” says Dr. Sabharwal. “And for mercury, it’s similar for people who are working in manufacturing and handle thermometers and barometers.”

Symptoms can vary. Hall says she’s experienced a range of problems including skin rashes, joint and muscle pain, dry eyes, swollen lymph nodes, acid reflux and brain fog.

The most affected organs are typically your kidneys and the brain. If blood levels of these toxins are extremely high, it can cause confusion and even coma.

“The symptoms are very nonspecific, which is what makes it very hard to be diagnosed,” says Dr. Sabharwal. “Symptoms could be nausea, vomiting, headache, belly pain, diarrhea, and for mercury poisoning it could be shortness of breath, chest pain. You see a lot of these symptoms that can be caused by other diseases, which is what makes it hard to diagnose, but that along with the history that the patient provides, whether it’s occupational or their environment, that’s what helps the provider gain a better understanding.”

There is no cure for mercury poisoning. Mercury and lead poisoning is typically treated with chelation therapy, which involves weekly IV treatments to remove the metal from your organs.

Treatment can last from a few days to a few weeks depending on blood levels and how a person responds to the medication.

Dr. Sabharwal says the best way to treat mercury poisoning is to limit your exposure to the metal and limit consumption of mercury-containing seafood. If the poisoning comes from your environment or workplace, the best advice is to stay away from that environment.

The key, Dr. Sabharwal adds, is to pay attention to your surroundings and if you are experiencing any possible symptoms, seek help immediately.

“The bottom line is that attention that should be given to prevention,” says Dr. Sabharwal. “So, when you’re at work, since that is the most common hazard for lead and mercury poisoning, is using personal protective equipment. That’s number one and then obviously keeping in mind what the signs and symptoms are and going to the physician earlier if you experience anything, so we can get you treated.”