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Hello, everybody. Thanks for taking time out of your evening to join me today, I’ll try not to bum you out too hard.

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So, for most of recorded history, humans have been surrounding themselves with a potent neurotoxin known as…

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Lead! Now, lead has a lot of great properties that made it a hot choice for metal workers and craftspeople for tens of thousands of years. It’s abundant in nature, it’s soft, malleable, very slow to rust, it has a low melting point, but maybe most importantly: it’s easy to extract.

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And we really have been at it for tens of thousands of years. That classic smokey eye look we see in ancient Egyptian art is called “Kohl,” and it was made by grinding up chunks of lead sulfide. Imagine putting that much lead so close to your eye, right? Kohl makeup is still really popular in the middle east, and modern kohl is made from much safer materials, but there wasn’t really a concerted effort to get the lead out until the early 90s.

And here on the right, we have a couple of ritual drinking cauldrons from the Ding dynasty, which was around the 10th and 11th century BC. And these were made from a bronze alloy that was comprised of copper, tin, and lead. That’s another great thing about lead, you can add it to alloys to lower their melting point and make them easier to work with.

But royals would drink this highly acidic wine that would leech incredible amounts of lead, like highly toxic amounts into the rest of the cauldron. There was this one princess-general named Fu Hao that would famously get these visions and hallucinations, and historians nowadays believe that it was just lead poisoning.

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And of course, we all know about the lead piping used by the ancient Romans. Folks like to say that this contributed to the downfall of the whole empire, and it probably did. But what was worse perhaps is the fact that their eating utensils and drinking vessels were also made from lead.

They also produced a sweetener called Sapa that was made by boiling unfermented grape juice in…lead kettles. So even if decades of unsoftened, unfiltered water may have left some lines with a kind of protective layer of sediment and limescale in their lead pipes, they still have a way to get their daily dose of neurotoxins.

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So we’re all aware of these two most common sources of ambient lead in our immediate environments. Lead has been added to paint since the 4th century BC partially because it helps speed up drying and improves durability, but largely because until the 20th century it was the only truly white pigment available in enough quantities to be actually useful. Nowadays we have zinc white and titanium white, but the next time you’re at an art gallery and you see a painting from the 1800s or earlier, it’s probably full of lead.

Up until it was banned in 1978, lead paint was used extensively in home construction. If anyone here is a homeowner, you know that the sales contracts on these older homes include a disclosure that basically says, “Hey, this house might have lead paint. Hope that’s cool!” And of course everyone signs it. There’s no law requiring that any lead paint be removed or encapsulated, and any work you do on a house that has lead paint has the potential to introduce lead dust into your environment.

So, leaded gasoline is particularly bad. Ever since the 1920s, tetraethyllead was added to gasoline because it greatly improves performance and fuel economy. The problem is that its molecular makeup allows it to dissolve in oils and fats, which lets it easily cross the blood-brain barrier. So imagine millions of vehicles pumping out this aerosolized, extra deadly form of lead all day, every single day. It’s accumulating in trees and soil, people are breathing it in, it’s collecting on the road and getting washed away into lakes and rivers and aquifers. The use of catalytic converters wasn’t required by law until 1975 and the outright sale of leaded gasoline wasn’t banned until 1996. It’s still used to this day in aircraft fuel but for the vast majority of the developed world, it’s been totally phased out.

Now, there are some less well-known modern sources of lead that might surprise you.

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It’s pretty much phased out by now, but lead was added to cosmetics for centuries because like I mentioned earlier it was the only real source of white pigment. As you can see here there’s still tiny amounts present in, but remember it accumulates in your body, right? And the EPA has been very clear that there is so safe level of lead that isn’t toxic to some extent. That’s a very important point: no amount of lead exposure is safe.

Lead acetate, or lead sugar as it was called back in the day, was pretty common in candy and some spices at the turn of the century. But even today, candy that’s been imported from other parts of the world have the danger of being contaminated with lead during the production process, and to this day small amounts of ink present in the ink used on candy wrappers and soak into the candy within.

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Now, we’re all aware of the dangers of using lead water pipes. It’s especially bad in residential use because the heat from hot water lines can actually cause more lead to leech into your water. But even if you have copper piping, you’re not totally out of the woods because the use of lead solder to join pipes was the industry standard up until it was banned in 1986. And again, any high temperature water going past those joints has the potential to bring some of that lead along with it.

And if you’re not sure if a particular pipe in your home is galvanized steel or lead, try using a magnet. Lead isn’t magnetic, so if it sticks to the pipe you’re good to go.

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Now, what are the actual effects of lead poisoning? Well, I’ve highlighted some of the mental effects on adults here: memory loss, lack of concentration, irritability, depression, but it wreaks havoc on the entire body. High blood pressure, kidney damage, increased chance of miscarriage…no part of the body is spared. But the effects are worse on children.

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Most notably on their nervous systems. We’ve observed behavior problems, lower IQ’s, cognitive dysfunction, even hearing loss…and a lot of these symptoms aren’t truly evident until they reach adolescence or adulthood. So by the time a parent can be made aware of the danger, it’s already too late. These kids are damaged permanently.

So it’s critically important that we remove or eliminate lead from as many communities as possible so we’re not starting another generation off with a handicap. And at the federal level we’ve made a lot of progress in the past 50 years. So how are we doing here in Tennessee? Good? Bad? And if we’re doing badly, what’s the human cost? Let’s take a look.

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One way we can figure this out is by measuring what’s called EBLL, or Elevated Blood Lead Levels. Every year, the Tennessee Department of Health tests the lead levels in a selection of children in all 95 counties, and when they get a result higher than 5 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood, it’s logged and reported to the Centers for Disease Control. That’s 5 millionths of a gram per one tenth of a liter, which is about three and half ounces. That’s how little lead it takes to permanently alter a child. And that threshold was actually reduced to 3.5 millionths back in October of last year. The numbers for 2023 and beyond are probably gonna be pretty grim.

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So for this map I took the average EBLL per 1,000 children from the past 5 years of publicly available data and then assigned it to the appropriate county. A few counties had their data suppressed because there were fewer than 50 children living there, so at the end of the day we’re looking at 88 out of 95 counties. And color-wise, we’re looking at green being fewer children per capita with an elevated blood lead level and closer to red representing a higher EBLL.

You probably already noticed that one bright red blight up there in the top right corner…that’s Hancock County, and nearly 34 out of every 1,000 children there have an elevated blood lead level. Almost twice the rate of the second worst county, Houston. But we’ll get back to that in a second.

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Here are the top 10 counties in terms of highest EBLL. We’ve got Hancock, Houston, Wayne, Benton, Marion, Lake, Dyer, Henry, Grundy, and Fentress.

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And here are the top 10 in terms of lowest EBLL. That’s Wilson, Coffee, Sullivan, Bradley, Rutherford, Warren, Sumner, Lauderdale, Blount, and McMinn.

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And here’s how both groups compare at a glance.