Lead poisoning remains the most significant environmental threat to the health of America’s children. More than half a million infants and children have blood lead levels exceeding 5 micrograms per deciliter, the reference level established by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. While lead poses health problems for people of all ages, its impacts are most devastating to infants and children aged six and under and to pregnant women. Exposure to lead at an early age can cause lifelong learning and behavioral difficulties.

In the majority of cases, children are exposed to lead via inhalation of aging lead-based paint. Lead was a common additive in most house paints until a governmental ban in 1978, so experts like Bonnie Hinds, a University of Tennessee Extension environmental health and housing specialist, say older homes are suspect for lead paint content.

“As lead-based paint ages and degrades, it breaks down into fine, talc-like dust,” said Hinds. “This dust is what creates an inhalation danger.” By conservative estimates, at least 25 percent of all American homes were constructed before 1978.

October 19-25 is designated as National Lead Poisoning Prevention Week, an annual observance spearheaded by the Environmental Protection Agency, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The theme of this year’s observance is “Lead-Free KIDS for a Healthy Future.”

For more information about lead poisoning prevention, contact the Tennessee Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program at 865-974-8178.

UT Extension provides a gateway to the University of Tennessee as the outreach unit of the Institute of Agriculture. With an office in every Tennessee county, UT Extension delivers educational programs and research-based information to citizens throughout the state. In cooperation with Tennessee State University, UT Extension works with farmers, families, youth and communities to improve lives by addressing problems and issues at the local, state and national levels. UT Extension and TSU Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.

For more information on this or other family and consumer sciences related topics, contact Shelly Barnes, Family and Consumer Sciences Extension agent for UT Extension in Wilson County. Barnes can be reached at sbarnes@utk.edu or 615-444-9584.