



Sarah S. Mack, MPH, Director  
Cameron Kaiser, M.D., Public Health Officer

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Contact:

**Linda Overton**, Charge Nurse for Child Health Programs

Riverside University Health System-Public Health

Office: 951.358.7245  
951.712.3705

Email: [LOverton@rivcocha.org](mailto:LOverton@rivcocha.org)

**Jose Arballo Jr.**, Public Information

RUHS-Public Health

Office: 951.358.5599 Cell:

Email: [jarballo@rivcocha.org](mailto:jarballo@rivcocha.org)

## Riverside family, county health officials warn of the dangers of childhood lead poisoning

Riverside resident and mother of three Griselda Jimenez sensed something was wrong. Her 18-month-old toddler, Miguel, was unusually lethargic and not forming words. When she shared these concerns with her son's doctor, they decided to run some tests just to be sure all was well.

Jimenez, 32, was shocked to learn that Miguel's blood tested "ridiculously high" for lead. A flurry of tests ensued, resulting in a week-long hospital stay for Miguel. There were also follow-up with her older children, Ezekiel, 3, and Gracie, 13, whose levels lead also were elevated.

Lead poisoning can harm young brains, making it hard for children to learn, pay attention and behave. Most children who have lead poisoning do not look or act sick. A blood test is the only way to know if your child has lead poisoning.

"Miguel was chewing on the windowsill and we believe that this is what contributed to the especially high lead levels in his blood," said Desiree Contreras, health services assistant with Riverside County Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program (CLPPP). Toddlers who are teething commonly chew on anything they can find. Lead tastes sweet, and homes built before 1978 can create a danger if they contain chipped and peeling lead-based paint.

Over the past year, 296 children in Riverside County have been identified with lead poisoning. Public health officials hope to increase awareness this week (Oct. 23-29) about the dangers of lead during Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Week.

Once a blood test is ordered in cases such as Miguel's, the county is notified of high blood lead levels by a state Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Branch public health nurse. The Riverside Lead Poisoning Prevention team ensured that Miguel was admitted to the hospital for treatment and then prompted an investigation of the Jimenez' rented home through the Riverside County Department of Environmental Health. The review found that the old interior paint and the soil surrounding the home was likely the source of the lead.

Environmental health professionals tested the family's home, which was built before 1978, and determined contamination was significant enough that the Jimenez family was forced to abandon their residence in December 2015.

"We were in a hotel for a month at Christmas time," Jimenez said. The family was able to secure temporary housing, thanks to a referral to Riverside County Department of Public Social Services.

"I am speaking out because I want people to know how dangerous lead is," Jimenez said, adding that Miguel is on his way to recovery.

The Riverside County CLPPP team linked the family to services including Inland Regional Center, Early Head Start and California Children's Services. Miguel attends weekly speech therapy services to improve his speech and language skills. He and his siblings are also tested routinely and have seen a marked decline in their blood lead levels.

Take these simple steps to keep your children safe from lead. Avoid chipping or peeling paint and dirt. Lead in dirt and dust can stick to hands and toys. Wash your children's toys frequently. Wash their hands often; especially before eating and sleeping. Feed your child healthy meals and snacks every day.

"This is a program that makes a real difference in the lives of families and children throughout Riverside County. We are happy to know that little Miguel is healing and we hope that this family's story will help to make all residents aware of the dangers of lead," said Sarah Mack, director of the Riverside University Health System – Public Health.

To learn more about lead poisoning prevention including reducing your child's exposure to lead, visit [www.rivcoclpp.org](http://www.rivcoclpp.org).

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