

Health officials still focused on possible lead poisoning



CHRIS NEVIN-WOODS
Public Health

There have been recent concerns about the Eilers Superfund project, and I would like to address them from a public health perspective.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is responsible for evaluating and cleaning up the environment — such as dangerous, contaminated areas. The EPA has determined the Eilers neighborhood, because it is a residential area close to the former Colorado Smelter site, is a high priority for clean-up. There is significant soil

contamination with high levels of lead and arsenic. The EPA's plan is to clean up the area so families living there now, and in the future, can be assured they will no longer be at risk for exposure.

Public health's role is to assist in preventing further exposure, determine who already has been exposed, and work to get them treatment and medical care for the toxicity. To this end, there have been a number of investigations: blood screenings looking for lead and urine testing for arsenic. It is important to remember these are just samples and may or may not represent the majority of the community and their exposure. The tests can give us clues as to the degree of current expo-

sure and poisoning from lead and arsenic.

When a community or group has blood lead levels in children higher than the national average (2.5 percent), there is a concern about possible lead poisoning that needs investigation. In the U.S., 97.5 percent of children tested at or below the national average. In all of the blood lead screenings in children who live in the Eilers area, the overall results were over 2.5 percent, indicating a level of concern. The average individual blood level in the U.S. is 1.17 micrograms per deciliter (ug/dl).

In the most recent investigation with the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, a part of the Centers

For Disease Control and Prevention, the percentage of the children (6 years old or younger) with test results at 5 ug/dl or higher was seven times higher than 2.5 percent. All of these children live in homes with dirt yards or played in areas with dirt. The lead exposure could be from contaminated soils and/or lead paint in older homes. In addition, almost all the children studied had levels of lead above 1.17 ug/dl.

Unfortunately, the testing done for arsenic has not provided useful information about risk to the most vulnerable population, children 6 and younger. The younger the child, the greater the chance he or she will get contaminated soil in

their mouth. This happens when babies and young children mouth toys in the dirt, eat dirt, and have dirt on their hands and then put them in their mouth. We were unable to test children 6 and younger.

Arsenic only stays in the urine for 48 to 72 hours after exposure. Ideally, the study should have been done in the summer, when families are more likely to be outside and playing and working in the yard a lot. However, due to federal funding and approval delays, the study occurred during cold weather in the fall.

The Pueblo City-County Health Department, along with state and federal consultants, will bring education to

the neighborhood regarding how dangerous lead is to pregnant women and young children. The department also will evaluate homes, looking for lead paint and pipes, and provide education on keeping children safe from lead inside and outside of the home.

We will work with health-care providers and schools to make sure children in this neighborhood are tested for lead, and have developmental evaluations and services as needed.

Dr. Christine Nevin-Woods, director of the Pueblo City-County Health Department, has both a medical degree and a master's degree in public health and preventive medicine.



PHOTOS FOR THE CHIEFTAIN/STEPHEN M. VOYNICK

A female black-tailed prairie dog and one of her kits groom each other on the center grounds.

Yip-yip, hooray: Prairie dogs state their case

AURORA — No matter where you look on the grounds of the Plains Conservation Center, a black-tailed prairie dog will probably be looking back at you.

Or making a racket designed to warn its fellow fur-balls that people are near.

Prairie dogs aren't dogs at all, but highly social rodents that spend much of their time chasing, tussling with, tumbling over and grooming each other — when they're not digging furiously in dirt mounded at openings to their

underground burrows (which can extend as much as 10 feet beneath the surface) or keeping a watchful eye on their surroundings.

As soon as something seems amiss, these critters alert other residents of their colonies or "towns" by emitting a series of high-pitched barks, yelps and yips (hence the "dog" misnomer).

Amazingly, these calls vary with the nature of the threat, be it hawk, owl, coyote or human. Studies indicate that the black-tailed prairie

dog, one of five prairie dog species native to North America's grasslands, has a repertoire of up to 50 different barks; some researchers maintain that the calls actually specify the type of potential predator, its size and the speed of its approach.

(That would make prairie dogs better communicators than some of my relatives.)

And if vocalizations alone don't suffice, the black-tailed prairie dog can always do the "jump-yip." This animated display involves standing

on the hind legs, stretching the body, raising the forefeet and throwing the head back while emitting a call. One after another, all the prairie dogs in the vicinity will mimic this movement, creating the rodent equivalent of "the wave" at sporting events.

Why do they do this? Theories range from giving the all-clear that the area is now predator-free to determining whether other members of the colony are still alive and vigilant.

But only the prairie dogs know for sure.

— Lynda La Rocca

Great Plains ecosystem relied on natural balance

AURORA — They're still here, although you wouldn't know it to look at the landscape.

Before America's massive western migration of the 19th century, the prairies covered 1.4 million square miles from Canada south through the Great Plains to Mexico and from Indiana west to the Rocky Mountains.

Historically, the prairie ecosystem — composed of tallgrass, or true prairie, in the wetter parts of the Great Plains; mixed-grass prairie in the central plains; and short-grass prairie near the Rocky Mountains — was maintained in its natural state through a combination of climate, grazing,

burrowing and fire.

Herds of grazing animals like bison, North America's largest land mammal, increased prairie growth by adding nitrogen to the soil through urine and feces; and immense colonies of burrowing prairie dogs aerated the soil by digging extensive subterranean tunnels that let water percolate several feet beneath the surface.

This water, in turn, sustained native plants, which had adapted to the wildfires that periodically swept the prairies by developing deep, underground root systems.

But more than a century of agriculture,

urban and suburban development, and fire-suppression practices have irrevocably altered the prairie.

Today, some of its last remnants are protected and maintained by organizations like the Plains Conservation Center. Founded more than a half-century ago as an educational agency for farmers and ranchers, the center has become a showcase for Colorado's short-grass prairie.

In addition to its Aurora property, the conservation center also preserves the West Bijou site, more than 8,000 acres located 30 miles to the east near Strasburg. Accessible only through

naturalist-led tours and programs, West Bijou is a short-grass prairie that supports its own bison herd — and serves as an outstanding example of Colorado's most unique and endangered ecosystem.

— Lynda La Rocca

Don't get rattled by snakes

AURORA — The Plains Conservation Center is located in prairie rattlesnake country. On the day my husband Steve and I visited, a young rattler was sunbathing in the parking lot before being safely removed and released by staff.

These venomous reptiles are pretty shy (by rattlesnake standards), and no one has ever been bitten at the conservation center, which welcomes 20,000 visitors annually. Nevertheless, *do not* approach or try to handle rattlers or any other snake species.

To avoid snakes, stay

on designated trails and keep hands and feet out of holes, burrows, brush piles and dark, cool places where a snake might be concealed.

Observe wildlife from a safe distance; don't chase or harass animals, or disturb burrows, dens or nesting sites. And be cautious around resident domestic animals; ask before touching or petting them.

Leave everything in its place; collecting natural objects of any kind, from feathers to animal bones, is prohibited.

Carry lots of water when hiking, regardless of the season.

— Lynda La Rocca



IF YOU GO

The Plains Conservation Center is 109 miles north of Pueblo. Take I-25 north for 94 miles to Exit 194 and the junction with E-470. Follow E-470 east for 13 miles to the Quincy Avenue exit. Turn right and take Quincy Avenue ¼ mile east to Gun Club Road. Turn left onto Gun Club Road and continue north for 1 mile to Hampden Avenue. Turn left on Hampden Avenue and drive 1 mile west to the conservation center.

In addition to Cultural History Days, the center hosts a number of special events and activities that let children and adults reconnect with nature and learn about the endangered plains ecosystem. These include Scout Days for Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts; Prairie Preschool; Sunset Safari Wagon Rides; photography and nature-writing workshops; guided hikes; naturalist-led tours of West Bijou; Prairie Fest on June 21; and Hops for Habitat, a fundraising beer festival on July 19.

Conservation center trails are open 8 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday-Saturday; nature center and museum hours are 8 a.m.-4 p.m., Saturday (no admission charge). Days, times, and costs for special events vary.

For information, contact: Plains Conservation Center, 21901 E. Hampden Ave., Aurora, CO 80013; 303-693-3621; PlainsCenter.org.

SOD HOUSE/from page 1E

then another and another — more than 2 feet thick.

Wood, a scarce and precious commodity on the prairie, was collected and salvaged from wherever it could be found or spared to make frames for doors, windows and roofs.

Once the "soddy" was finished, the never-end-

ing (and basically impossible) task of keeping it clean began. Settlers covered interior walls with cloth or whitewash to minimize dirt and dust, but that didn't deter bugs and mice or prevent snakes from dropping out of ceilings and into living areas.

Adding to all the comforts of home, "chips" and "pies," the dried dung of bison and cattle, were used as fuel for cooking and heating.

"It really didn't smell bad," a center volunteer assures me.

I'll take her word for it.

— Lynda La Rocca

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