NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - A common therapy used to remove dangerously high levels of lead from the body may also improve muscle functions involved in balance and movement in children exposed to high levels of lead early in life.

Dr. Amit Bhattacharya and colleagues at the University of Cincinnati found in a study of 161 lead-exposed children that those treated with the "lead-scrubbing" drug succimer showed a 19 percent improvement in their ability to perform moving tasks -- such as crossing an obstacle or walking -- than those who did not receive treatment.

Succimer therapy improved static balance.

These results, along with that of earlier research, "suggests that such therapy may result in reduced injuries," Bhattacharya told Reuters Health.

"Lead exposure is a very serious issue," the professor of environmental health and lead author of the study added in a statement, "and it's important to identify early signs of neuromotor (muscle-function) exposure effects -- such as impaired postural balance or locomotion -- before permanent damage occurs."

"Our research may help develop control strategies for minimizing exposure to lead at an earlier stage," Bhattacharya said.

It's estimated that more than 434,000 U.S. children between the ages of 1 and 5 have elevated blood lead levels. Lead is known to be associated with decreased intellectual capabilities and balance disorders among infants, children and teens.