



Questions & Answers

Lead in School Drinking Water

Is lead a health concern for children?

Yes, especially for infants and children under six years of age because their brains and nervous systems are still developing. Even very low levels of lead in a child's blood can affect IQ, ability to pay attention, and academic achievement. The effects of lead exposure cannot be corrected.

Drinking water usually isn't a significant source of lead. Most exposure to lead comes from dust and chips from interior and exterior lead-based paint removal, lead-contaminated soil, industrial sources, and materials that contain lead used in parental occupations or hobbies. Lead from all of these sources contribute to a person's overall lead exposure.

Should I test my child for lead if it's detected in the school's drinking water?

If you are concerned, you should consult your medical provider. A blood test is the only way to find out whether someone has elevated blood lead.

How does lead get into drinking water?

Lead in drinking water usually comes from a building's plumbing system. Lead present in solder, brass fixtures, and lead or galvanized pipes can leach into water standing in the plumbing system. The amount of lead that leaches into drinking water, if any, depends on how corrosive the water is and the materials used to construct the plumbing system. The age of the building does not seem to matter. Even new plumbing fixtures can leach lead into drinking water.

The longer water stands in the plumbing system, the more lead it can absorb. Factors such as water chemistry and temperature affect the rate at which water absorbs lead.

Why is lead a concern for schools?

The "on-again, off-again" nature of water use at most schools can raise lead levels in drinking water. Water that sits overnight, during a weekend, or vacation stays in contact with lead pipes or lead solder longer, and could contain higher levels of lead. Reducing the amount of lead in drinking water to as close to zero as possible is an important part of reducing a child's overall exposure to lead in the environment.

Do drinking water rules address lead in schools?

Yes. The Washington State Department of Health Office of Drinking Water oversees state and federal drinking water rules. Most schools get their water from public water systems that must comply with the federal Lead and Copper Rule.

If a school owns or operates its own water system, it must comply with the federal Lead and Copper Rule. We require these systems to sample for lead to minimize the risk of exposure from drinking water.

Congress enacted the 1988 [Lead Contamination Control Act \(LCCA\)](#) to reduce lead exposure, and any health risks, in drinking water at schools and childcare centers. The focus of the LCCA was to remove drinking water coolers with lead-lined tanks. Although the LCCA included monitoring and reporting requirements for schools, the act was challenged in court and cannot be enforced.



HELPING TO ENSURE SAFE AND RELIABLE DRINKING WATER

The State Board of Health adopted revisions to [WAC 246-366, Primary and Secondary Schools](#) (titled WAC 246-366A) that includes a section requiring lead testing. However, the new provisions of the rule can't be implemented until funding is included in the legislative budget. Until funding is available, the previous version of the rule remains in effect and does NOT include lead testing.

How can schools test for lead in drinking water?

Testing for lead in schools can be complex, especially the first time. It requires researching your school design, training staff to take samples correctly, and communicating clearly before and after sampling.

For help with lead testing, see the following publications:

- [3Ts for Reducing Lead in Drinking Water in Schools: Revised Technical Guidance \(816-B-05-008\)](#) October 2006. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency developed the 3Ts (training, testing, and telling) to help schools implement simple strategies for managing the health risks from lead in schools and drinking water.
- [Testing for lead in school drinking water systems \(331-261\)](#) Washington State Department of Health, October 2006. A brochure with step-by-step instructions on collecting samples in a school building.

How can schools reduce lead levels?

Boiling the water will not remove lead. Activities that may help reduce lead include:

- Advising staff and students to run the water for a few seconds before drinking.
- Removing or replacing fixtures that leach lead.
- Flushing the piping system in the building.
- Providing bottled water.
- Repairing the plumbing system.
- Using only the cold-water tap for drinking, preparing juice or cooking.
- Installing water treatment devices.
- Developing a new source of drinking water.

Does the state provide funds to help cover the cost of replacing fixtures?

Not at this time. When schools determine they need plumbing improvements, they should explore funding sources with their district and governing boards. Schools may also benefit by talking to their water utility about the high lead levels and asking if steps are underway to improve water quality.

Where can I get more information?

If you have questions, call 360-236-3122 or email derrick.dennis@doh.wa.gov

Our publications are online at <https://fortress.wa.gov/doh/eh/dw/publications/publications.cfm>

Additional resources are online at:

Washington State Department of Ecology, List of accredited drinking water labs

http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/eap/labs/documents/DWLABs_WABByCounty.pdf

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

<http://water.epa.gov/infrastructure/drinkingwater/schools/guidance.cfm>