



Lead in School Drinking Water: Guide for Parents and Schools

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The safe level of lead for children is ZERO.

The basics: children's environmental health and lead in school water

- Children are uniquely vulnerable to environmental contaminants. Their bodies are still developing and they eat, drink, and breathe more per pound of body weight than adults. They are exposed to more environmental threats and are not able to protect themselves (US EPA, NIEHS, CDC).
- Lead is one of the most dangerous threats to children's environments, including school and childcare, where they spend many active, waking hours each week.
- Exposure to lead, even at very low levels, can permanently harm children's health, learning, and behavior.
- US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that lead in drinking water is 20% or more of a person's total lead exposure.
- Everyone can help prevent children's exposure to lead and press for public health measures to eliminate lead and eliminate exposures.

What is lead? Where does it come from?

- Lead is a naturally occurring element found in small amounts in the earth's crust.
- Lead can enter people's bodies from the food they eat, the air they breathe, and the water they drink.
- Exposure to lead can result in serious damage to the brain, nervous system, and red blood cells.
- In schools, lead contamination of drinking water comes from lead pipes or lead solder or from brass faucets, valves, and other plumbing components. Lead was sometimes also used to line old water coolers.
- The amount of lead allowed in bottled water by the Food and Drug Administration is 5 ppb (parts per billion).
- Your school or childcare facility can test taps and remediate to 5 ppb.

Why should parents care about lead in school drinking water?

- Children spend more time at school and childcare than at any place other than home.
- Lead in water is a widespread problem but most schools have never been required to address it.
- Testing at the tap in schools in several states found lead in all schools, from low to very high levels.
- The poorest schools in the worst physical condition are likely to have the most lead (in paint and water) and are also likely to enroll the poorest and most vulnerable children.

What are the health effects of lead on children and pregnant women?

- **Children**
 - Behavior and learning problems, such as hyperactivity and lower IQ
 - Slowed growth

... for children ... environment ... health ... education ... and communities ... since 1995 ...

- Hearing problems
 - Anemia (low levels of red blood cells)
 - In rare cases: seizures, coma, and sometimes even death
- **Pregnant women**
- Risk of miscarriage or risk of premature birth
 - Damage to the baby's brain, kidneys, and nervous system
 - Future learning or behavior problems in the child

What is the US Environmental Protection Agency doing to help schools and childcare facilities?

- As of last year, all states and territories received EPA grants for voluntary testing of lead in schools.
- In 2023, EPA issued new grants from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) to address lead in school and childcare drinking water. See <https://www.epa.gov/dwcapacity/wiin-grant-voluntary-school-and-child-care-lead-testing-and-reduction-grant-program>.
- States and school districts may also use ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) funds to help with environmental issues in schools including lead in water, indoor air, and creating environmental health plans.

What can schools and communities do to eliminate lead in school or childcare drinking water?

- **First, remember:** your school or childcare provider did not put lead in the drinking water; the lead industry has lobbies to allow lead in water pipes and plumbing fixtures, in congress and in the states.
- At the state level, ask your elected officials to enact tough laws. To protect children and youth, there must be enforceable regulations and regulatory oversight on lead in school and childcare drinking water, as well as state funding to assist local schools and childcare facilities in testing and remediation.
- States are enacting laws to test for and to require remediation of lead in school water. New York State set a level of 15 ppb (parts per billion) in 2016; in 2022, the NY state legislature enacted an updated law requiring schools to remediate down to 5 ppb, post test results, and provide free, clean water if taps are closed due to lead levels.

More ways to improve protection for kids

- **Parents: test your tap water at home. Don't be surprised if you find lead; take action or urge your landlord to act.**
 - Use the EPA guide on how to check drinking water at home: <https://www.epa.gov/ground-water-and-drinking-water/protect-your-tap-quick-check-lead-0>.
- **Schools:** use EPA's 3T's guide for testing, training, and taking action on lead in school/childcare water: <https://www.epa.gov/ground-water-and-drinking-water/3ts-reducing-lead-drinking-water>
 - A public meeting for parents and the community is useful to explain the technical steps and the typical timeline needed to test taps, get test results back from a qualified laboratory, and then remediate individual taps if needed. Schools could also explain how to test home drinking water.
 - EPA does not set a specific action level for lead in school water, but state legislatures are setting levels of lead in school drinking water from 4 ppb to 15 ppb.
 - Extremely high levels (thousands of ppb lead) at one outlet may mean that the water fountain or outlet tap is banned by EPA.
 - Schools should report their test results on their websites and to state agencies, parents, staff, and communities, and post plans for frequent maintenance of filters.
 - ALERT for School Facility Directors, head custodians, and or School Business Officials who find that EPA's certified "lead-free" fixtures have high levels of lead: share that information with other schools and report the brands to EPA.

➤ **Everyone**

- Press your state legislatures to require and to fund testing and remediation of school drinking water. Remediation might include filtration, bottle-filling stations, or bottled water.
- Ask your city or state procurement (purchasing) agency to include EPA “lead-free” fixtures and lead filters certified to remove lead in their procurement contracts. Public agencies and public and private schools can buy from state contracts. Bulk purchases reduce per-unit costs.

Additional resources

Natural Resources Defense Council, Get the Lead Out of School Drinking Water Act, a state model bill. Accessed June 28, 2019, <https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/get-lead-out-school-drinking-water-act-model-legislation.pdf>

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