

FACT SHEET

LEAD IN SCHOOL DRINKING WATER IS A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS



Lead in drinking water in schools and child care centers presents a public health crisis for our children. The experts agree: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), American Academy of Pediatrics, and World Health Organization all state that there is no safe level of lead exposure.^{1,2,3}

Alarmingly, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has only a voluntary program to reduce lead in drinking water in schools. States must step up and adopt mandatory programs to remedy this serious problem. NRDC has created a model law for states that sets forth the best practices for filtration, testing, and remediation of lead in order to rid it from schools and child care centers.⁴

WHAT IS LEAD? AND HOW DOES IT GET INTO SCHOOL DRINKING WATER?

Lead is a poisonous heavy metal that can affect almost every organ and system in the human body, often with irreversible effects. Many schools and child care facilities are housed in old buildings with aging plumbing fixtures, fittings, pipes, and solder that contain the metal, which can leach into the drinking water. Even new plumbing may not be entirely free of lead.

LEAD CAN HAVE DISASTROUS EFFECTS ON CHILDREN AND FETUSES

NRDC chronicled the harmful effects of lead in drinking water in its report *What's in Your Water? Flint and Beyond*.⁵ Children and fetuses are particularly vulnerable to the effects of lead. Even at very low levels that were once considered safe, it can cause serious, irreversible damage to developing brains and nervous systems. Lead can decrease a child's cognitive capacity, cause behavior problems, and limit the ability to concentrate—all of which affects lifetime learning. Children with serious lead-related brain impacts are less likely to graduate from high school and are more prone to delinquency, teen pregnancy, violent crime, and incarceration.

Moreover, many staff in schools and child care centers are women of childbearing age. Lead can cross the placental barrier of a pregnant mom into the womb and harm the fetus. The CDC also notes that “lead exposure can cause miscarriage, stillbirths, and infertility (in both men and women).”⁶ And even in otherwise healthy adults, lead exposure can cause adverse cardiovascular and kidney effects, cognitive dysfunction, and elevated blood pressure.

Endnotes

- 1 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “What Do Parents Need to Know to Protect Their Children?” updated May 17, 2017, https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/acclpp/blood_lead_levels.htm.
- 2 American Academy of Pediatrics, “Lead Exposure in Children,” 2016, <https://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/lead-exposure/Pages/Lead-Exposure-in-Children.aspx>.
- 3 World Health Organization, “Lead Poisoning and Health,” August 23, 2018, <https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/lead-poisoning-and-health>.
- 4 Joan Leary Matthews, “Get the Lead Out of Drinking Water in Schools: Model Law,” NRDC, April 24, 2019, <https://www.nrdc.org/experts/joan-leary-matthews/get-lead-out-drinking-water-schools>.
- 5 Erik D. Olson and Kristi Pullen Fedinick, “What's in Your Water? Flint and Beyond,” NRDC, June 28, 2016, <https://www.nrdc.org/resources/whats-your-water-flint-and-beyond>.
- 6 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: “Lead: Information for Workers,” updated June 18, 2018, <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/lead/health.html>.

For more information, please contact:

Joan Leary Matthews, Senior Attorney & Director, Urban Water Management
jmatthews@nrdc.org

www.nrdc.org
www.facebook.com/nrdc.org
www.twitter.com/NRDCEnergy