

Health Unit Options for Taking Action on Getting Lead Out of School Drinking Water

ISSUE: Ontario's regulations regarding lead in school drinking water are outdated, which is putting children's health at risk. Despite lack of change at the provincial level, public health units can act now to ensure that lead testing and mitigation decisions are informed by the most up-to-date evidence.

RECOMMENDED ACTION

1. **Recognize** that no amount of lead is safe, especially for children;
2. **Get the lead out** of schools by responding to lead exceedances with mitigation measure that will eliminate exposure;
3. **Share vital information** about school water quality by ensuring schools with known lead infrastructure test annually, and encouraging school boards to make water quality data more accessible.

BACKGROUND

- There is no safe level of lead. Scientists have not been able to find a level of exposure that is not linked to negative neurodevelopmental health outcomes.
- Ontario's regulation for lead in drinking water in schools is O. Reg. 243/07. It sets the legal limit for lead in drinking water to 10 parts-per-billion (ppb).
- O. Reg. 243/07 outlines mandatory lead testing and mitigation protocols, but local public health units can require schools to take stronger action and are consulted when schools apply for testing exemptions.
- In 2019, the federal government issued new guidance that reduced the maximum acceptable concentration of lead in water to 5ppb. Ontario is one of only two provinces and territories that have not adopted this updated guidance.

ACTION 1: Recognize that no amount of lead is safe

- In their 2019 guidance document, Health Canada recognizes that no amount of lead exposure is safe, especially for children.
- This means that even the 5ppb limit is not "safe," but is just a measurable target that can be used to help guide efforts to get lead levels in water as low as reasonably possible.
- Internal documents show the Ontario government staff agree that reducing the lead limit to 5ppb would be beneficial for the health of vulnerable groups, and the Auditor General has criticised the province for not providing transparency about their decisions on this issue.
- Elimination of lead exposure, not just compliance with regulation, should be the goal of all school drinking water interventions.

ACTION 2: Get the Lead Out

Local public health units can instruct schools on what action to take when a lead exceedance is found. CELA is calling on the provincial government to strengthen the required mitigation measures, but health units can protect student health *now* by implementing the following changes:

End the reliance on flushing:

- Research shows that lead levels can rise significantly just minutes or hours after flushing, meaning that flushing water through the tap in the morning does not guarantee safety throughout the day.
- In many cases, flushing interventions for specific taps are not permanent, meaning that the fixture can be returned to regular use in the future with no follow-up testing despite no action being taken to remove lead infrastructure.
- Public Health Units could adopt a similar approach to flushing as what is used in Quebec, wherein:
 - Flushing is only used as an intervention when the lead levels are not extremely high *and* when another intervention, such as replacement, filtration, or removal of the fixture from use, is not an option.
 - Signage is posted instructing students to flush the tap before each use, as opposed to once-daily.
 - Annual testing of fixtures using a flushing intervention is encouraged.

Prioritize Replacement and Filtration:

- Elimination of lead exposure should be the goal of interventions, and lead infrastructure replacement and filtration are the most effective ways to achieve this.
- Recognizing that schools have budget constraints, public health units could recommend that schools prioritize making some fixtures lead-free and closing fixtures that are not essential and cannot be corrected at this time.
 - It is preferable to take fixtures with known lead infrastructure out of use permanently than to allow them to re-open under a flushing regime, which may not be effective at protecting children from lead exposure.

ACTION 3: Share vital information

- Under O. Reg. 243/07, schools can apply for an exemption to annual testing if they have gone 24 consecutive months with no lead exceedances. In some cases, exempt schools can test as few as one tap every three years.
- Given that Ontario has not adopted the updated 5ppb limit on lead in drinking water, schools are being exempt from testing based on results that would spark mitigation action in the majority of other provinces and territories
- Public health units can use their role as experts in water safety to consult with schools seeking testing exemptions about negative impacts that this action could have on children's health.
- Public Health Units can encourage school boards to improve accessibility of lead testing records or to share exceedance notices. This will help ensure that the community is informed and will encourage discussions with students about the importance of following instructions about drinking water.
- Some Ontario school boards already make lead testing information available online, despite not being required to do so. This improves accessibility for caregivers that may not have the time to visit the school in-person to view physical records.

NEXT STEPS

- Read CELA's report [*'F' for Effort: Ontario is falling behind on getting lead out of school drinking water.*](#)
- Review internal processes for providing lead mitigation instructions and consider if they:
 - Facilitate progress towards the goal of eliminating lead from schools
 - Are informed by the most up-to-date research and best practices
- Reach out to CELA with questions or comments about how local health units can protect children in schools from lead exposure and/or areas where the recommendations in this document can be improved.
- Discuss the need for stronger protections against lead in drinking water during conversations with the province.