



Connecting the Drops

Transcript: Monitoring for lead in schools

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When cost-cutting in Flint, Michigan raised lead contamination in public drinking water, the nation became aware that water can sometimes harbor dangerous amounts of lead. The failures in Flint may result in stronger rules nationwide for monitoring home drinking water. But schools are not part of these public tests. That's why Colorado legislators are proposing a bill to help more Colorado schools pay for testing lead in their drinking water. Meanwhile, some Colorado schools have taken on the cost themselves. For Connecting the Drops, Shelley Schlender reports...

Water is so good for health, Jefferson County's Stober Elementary strives to make it the favorite drink. Fourth grader Aram likes to head to his favorite water fountain after a game of capture the flag.

"Tastes really good. And, tastes cold."

The water's good in another way, because this Denver Metro school district has been testing every single sink and fountain for the heavy metal known as lead. After all, excess lead can damage health.

Mike Van Dyke, Colorado Chief of Environmental Epidemiology says lead exposure can lead to all kinds of health problems.

"Typically the levels that we see today are really related to cognitive problems later in life, kids not learning as well. Kids not being able to pay attention as well at school."

Van Dyke says lead contamination is more common than most people realize.

"Lead paint, lead in soil, and I think if you're in an older house, you need to at least think about lead in your water."

Many Colorado School Districts are thinking about lead in their water because many school buildings are older. Plus, last year came the tragedy of Flint, Michigan. In Flint, cutting corners on water safety left some homes with lead in drinking water hundreds of times higher than what the Environmental Protection Agency considers safe.

Kim MacDonnell who directs Environmental Services for Jefferson County Schools and its 85,000 students, says Flint brought lead in water to the nation's attention. While public water providers do random checks of homes for high lead levels, they don't test schools. MacDonnell says that JeffCo schools had not checked water levels of lead for nearly three decades. Last spring, in response to Flint, several large Denver Metro school districts decided to test their own waters. They included Jeffco Schools, which started testing every single fountain and faucet in the district.

“We have probably spent overall between water sampling and fixture changes at some of the schools, probably around \$300,000.”

Jeffco has tested around seven thousand sinks and water fountains. They’ve been checking location by location. They’ve found higher lead in water where pipes are corroded or when water’s been sitting. MacDonnell points out that excess lead in water can happen, really, anywhere with metal pipes.

“Anybody who has plumbing in water fixtures has the potential to have some lead content in them.”

Ninety three percent of Jeffco Schools water samples have come back safe. That’s a better “Grade A” than the EPA’s 90 percent standard mandated for random tests of home drinking water. But for the sake of kids, JeffCo wants no excessive lead. So the school district has replaced the most corroded plumbing. For an example of stagnant water at Stober, MacDonnell heads through the library, past a copy machine, to a quiet corner with a little sink which she says is the only location at which they found an elevated level of lead. It’s a supervised location. Still, they’ve labeled the sink.

“We’ve got the picture for the wee ones that can’t read that has a faucet with a glass of water underneath it and a circle with a line through it. It also states on there, do not drink, for hand washing only. You know, the water here in this sink is appropriate for hand washing. We wouldn’t want anybody to fill their water bottle here.”

For people who want to check for lead at home, MacDonnell says, contact local health officials. She adds that one way to reduce lead in drinking water is, first thing in the morning, at least do this:

“It’s a good idea to run the water until you feel a change in the temperature and it becomes more cold.”

“Cold” means fresher, which might be why Stober Elementary students call the most popular, and flowing, water fountain the best.

To keep it really good, JeffCo Schools plans to test each school’s water for lead every five years. To help more school districts test for lead in their drinking water, Colorado’s House Bill 17-1306 proposes financial assistance.